

VARIATIONS

ON A THEME 6



Valerie Piacentini

& Sheila Clark

a

STAR TREK

fanzine

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 6

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A ScoTpress publication

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Sheila Clark

6 Craigmill Cottages

Strathmartine

by Dundee

Scotland.

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

In Kraith Collected, we met Commodore Spock, from another universe. His Kirk had been killed, and Spock, confused and unhappy, having discovered the existence of other universes, attempted to find a replacement for his own lost Kirk. However, he misinterpreted half-understood data that had been transmitted to him through his sensor equipment, and Kirk resented his attempt to 'rescue' him; when his own Spock arrived he returned with him, leaving the Commodore doubly alone.

We were concerned over the plight of the Commodore, and wondered how he might continue his search. The Variations on a Theme universe arose from our discussions on how he might do so. We must stress, however, that our universe is in no way related to the Kraith universe.

Indeed, we have come to realise that by taking a 'short cut', so to speak, we made a mistake. We would have been better to have written a short beginning covering the events leading up to Variations 1 instead of referring our readers to Kraith, since it now appears that many of you do not know the Kraith universe at all. Indeed, some readers have indicated that they think events in the Commodore's universe referred to in the pages of Variations happened in Kraith, and they want to read the Kraith story to find out details. Not so. All the references to Spock's original universe that we make come from us, except two; in Kraith, Commodore Spock is stated to be immune to pon farr, and in his original universe, Spock, in common with all his race, was not telepathic. We are told practically nothing in Kraith about the Commodore's universe, since it was an alternate universe encountered only briefly by the Kraith Kirk and Spock.

However, for anyone who would like to read the original story that sparked off Variations on a Theme, the story is Spock's Pilgrimage in Kraith Collected 4, available from Debbie Goldstein, 11524 Nashville, Detroit, MI 48205, U.S.A. You could also try Margaret Draper, The Lodge, Wantage Road, Rowstock, Didcot, OXON, since copies of Kraith Collected were being sold off the Alnitah table at AUCON '81.

The story of Variations so far is as follows. In issue 1, his equipment improved, Spock detected the presence of a Kirk who did need to be rescued from an untenable situation. The young, shy and sensitive First Officer to a Spock who had never adjusted to his Human blood, Kirk was used by his Spock with sadistic cruelty, being made a sexual partner in spite of his horror and disgust at such treatment.

Spock set out to rescue him. In the process the Captain was killed, and Spock remained in that universe, taking his counterpart's place. The body was left in Spock's original universe.

The remainder of issue 1 was taken up with the beginnings of Kirk's rehabilitation, and finished with a reasonably self-confident Kirk adjusting to a new life without fear.

In Variations 2, Spock was obliged to go 'home' to visit 'his' parents. Unfortunately, the Captain had accidentally left a private tape in his room, and his father had heard it. He believed Spock was ill-treating Kirk and tried to kill him; in saving Spock, Kirk was injured, and Sarek had to be told the truth. To their surprise, instead of denouncing them and leaving them to face the justice of the Family Council, Sarek accepted Spock as his son.

Sam Kirk then came aboard the Enterprise as a crewman. On a mission to Deneva, Sam, who had deserted Kirk as a child, again deserted him, but this time Spock was there to help him.

In Variations 3, Spock ran into problems with his Family Council. Although Sarek knew the truth and accepted it, they could not hope that the rest of the Council would be as understanding; if they discovered the truth, Kirk might be called to account for killing the Captain, and punished with the full rigour of Vulcan law. The truth had therefore to be kept hidden.

The Family Council insisted that Spock marry. However, in this universe, the bonding ceremony triggered off pon farr - to which Spock was immune. He would therefore be unable to consummate a Vulcan bonding, his wife would complain, and the imposture would be discovered.

Kirk also, because of the sexual assault he had suffered from the Captain, was impotent - psychologically so. He was afraid to enter into any sort of personal relationship with anyone but Spock, whom he knew to be impotent.

Realising the situation both men were in, McCoy suggested that they bond - a relationship legal on Vulcan though rarely entered into. The Family, not particularly happily, conceded that this was permissible, and Spock and Kirk were legally bonded. They did not, however, form a full bonding meld although they linked minds.

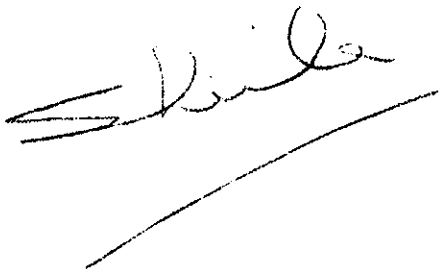
In the same issue, Gary Mitchell came on board as navigator. Basically lazy, he finally settled down to become a steady, uninspired member of the crew.

In issue 4, McCoy discovered he had xenopolycythemia. Spock remembered Yonada - but in this universe, the Enterprise had encountered Yonada before Spock's entry into Kirk's life - a plague ship crewed by only a handful of immune disease carriers. To stop them spreading the disease or crashing onto an inhabited world, the Captain had destroyed Yonada. Spock therefore decided to go back to his own universe, find McCoy there, and obtain the cure from him. When he failed to return, Kirk went in search of him, leaving Charlene Masters in command of the Enterprise.

Issue 5 saw the Enterprise being used for a basically political mission, first to the Amerind planet where Kirk, as the god Kirok, had to persuade a native tribe to leave their lands 'because the gods wanted them' - in fact, Starfleet had discovered traces of the Preservers there and wanted to investigate them. This done, the Enterprise was assigned to take the Dohlman Elaam to Troyius - with an overbearing Petri determined to find fault with everything the shy princess-to-be did.

Now, with issue 6, the Enterprise carries on with more diplomatic duties - namely, to take a number of Federation delegates to Babel for a conference. On the way, Kirk becomes involved twice in scientific missions...and is tricked into taking a wife.

We have not begun work yet on Variations 7, as both of us are trying to get on with other stories which have been delayed by our putting out two issues of Variations so close together. As we said before, we don't at the moment intend to take the series beyond No. 7 - but even if we don't, remember - even with Variations 7, the story is not finished yet. And in the future, anything can happen.



IT SEEMS A SHAME...

It seems such a waste
That the only time
I might have felt your love
I rejected it.
Spock says I should not blame myself;
That I was too emotionally involved
To be able to recognise
The open hands of sympathy
That you offered to share my pain.
But I'd never seen them before,
So how could I accept
The sight before my tear-filled eyes?

Even so...

It seems an awful shame.

Gene Delapenia

BARBARIAN!

Barbarian!

You do not say it openly,
But yet I hear it clear, an accusation
In every word you utter.

Barbarian.

It should not hurt like this.
Why should I let it trouble me?
We were the same race once;
Our customs...now so different. We progressed,
While you remained
Refusing equal rights to all.
We recognised
That all men have the right to freedom;
That leaders have responsibility
That more than balances
The privileges they enjoy.
And so we are respected - even loved.
You recognise only privilege;
Your people are unhappy
And I am sure you fear them.
You know that one day they will overthrow you -
Barbarian!

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 6MURASAKI 312

"Babel conference," McCoy said disgustedly. "Spit and polish, dress uniforms...." He tugged irritably at the collar of the aforementioned offending costume.

Spock concealed a smile. So had the other McCoy spoken, years before in the other universe.

The Vulcan's mind ranged back to the events so long past.

A conference called to debate the admission of Coridan to the Federation. His own father one of the delegates, behaving with barely concealed hostility towards him yet calling his mother to task for supposedly embarrassing him - he had been more embarrassed by Sarek's behaviour, he remembered. The presence aboard the ship of an Orion spy disguised as an Andorian; the attack on the other Kirk by that Orion after the unmentioned murder of the Tellarite Gav; Sarek's heart attack.

Well, events would not be exactly duplicated. Sarek would not be aboard, although Uncle Selek would be; but he was a healthy man despite his age. There were no Tellarites or Andorians aboard, nor would there be. Unfortunately, they did have Petri.

Privately, Spock considered him a bad choice of delegate, while conceding Prince Arris's quite natural wish to remove from court the man who had caused his wife so much distress. Whatever the Elasian women's secret was, Elaan had certainly used it to good effect on Arris - or perhaps she had not needed to. She had looked almost happy when she made her farewells to them. And Cyon - Arris - had seemed a sensible and sensitive man.

This shipload - three other ships were also picking up delegates - had, with the exception of the contingent from Vanla, been picked up quickly, and they would collect the Vanlans on their present course while still a full day's travel from Babel. With almost all their entire complement of diplomats on board, they could return to standard uniform for most of the trip. They could not afford to waste time, but they had several days in hand; a steady warp one would take them to Babel in plenty of time. Captain Shevas' timetable, Spock knew, would require him to travel at warp four after he had picked up the last of his passengers if he was to reach Babel in time.

Just this one more evening...

"Shuttle approaching," came the disembodied voice from the wall speaker. "Honour guard stand by."

The men hastened into position.

"Hangar deck pressurising...hangar deck pressurised."

The door slid open; the guard hurried to their assigned places. The shuttle door opened; the occupants emerged.

"Welcome aboard, Ambassador Selek," Spock said formally, raising his hand in salute.

"Spock." Selek's gaze travelled past the Captain to Kirk. "James."

Kirk saluted gravely. "Ambassador Selek."

"Dr. McCoy."

McCoy knew better than to try the salute. He half bowed. "Ambassador."

T'Kara now stepped forward, and was greeted in her turn. Both Kirk and Spock - and to a lesser extent McCoy - were relieved that Sendak was not with his parents. Then Spock dismissed the honour guard.

"I will take you to your quarters, Uncle. I trust you and my aunt will give us the pleasure of your company at dinner tonight?"

"Thank you, Spock. That would be most enjoyable."

Spock wished he could agree.

Kirk joined Spock in the mess, carrying his customary cup of coffee. Spock's eyes smiled a welcome.

The First Officer smiled back. Neither needed words to express their pleasure in each other's company; their half-formed bond let each of them know that the other was content.

Not until his coffee was finished did Kirk break the comfortable silence.

"Spock."

"Yes, Jim?"

"We have time in hand, don't we."

"You know we do. Ah - you would like...?"

"To investigate the Murasaki Effect, yes."

Spock thought about it.

The ship's scientific personnel - and through them, the Captain - had standing orders to investigate certain stellar phenomena, and the Muraskai Effect was one such. Few ships had passed near it; the few that had, had had little time to investigate it. From these reports, it was known that the gaseous cloud that formed the Murasaki Effect glowed because inside it was a young sun known to have planets. Murasaki 312 was a surprisingly strong radio source, too; even sub-space communications were subject to interference while in the vicinity of the Murasaki cloud, although this was intermittant.

It was hardly surprising that Kirk,



knowing they had time on hand, would want to investigate; and indeed, Spock's own scientific interest was aroused. He had never been near the Murasaki Effect in his own universe, although he had heard of it, and had it not been for the presence of the various diplomats aboard the Enterprise, he would gladly have joined his Science Officer in an investigation of the Effect...but it would not be exactly tactful for a Captain who had never served in the science department of a ship to absent himself at this time for a scientific exploration, no matter how brief. Certainly, if he went, he could expect Uncle SeleK to approve and support him; all he required to do, with SeleK, was say, 'My bondmate wishes my assistance'.

But no. Their bonding was still a secret to everyone but McCoy outside the Vulcan family circle. It would not be fair to expose Jim to the speculation and gossip that would surely follow any public announcement of their bond. Many Humans still regarded same-sex relationships with distaste, and their circumstances made it impossible for them to admit that theirs was an emotional union only.

Kirk waited patiently, knowing that Spock must consider all the implications of stopping for a 'mere' scientific investigation in the middle of a diplomatic mission.

Finally -

"I don't see why not," Spock said. "Such a stop is covered by standing orders. Of course, we would have to limit our exploration to - at most - forty-eight hours." He was rewarded by the excitement on Kirk's face. "How do you want to go about the investigation?"

"All the reports we have so far were gained from long-range scans," Kirk replied. "I thought that closer investigation in a shuttlecraft might be useful."

"Who did you think of taking?"

"Well, I'll need an astrophysicist - Boma would be best - he's made a special study of young stars, and it wouldn't do any harm to take Gaetano along - he's relatively inexperienced, but how else will he learn? With Boma there to keep him right, it would be valuable experience for him. I thought of Latimer of the geology department, in case we get good readings from the planets; we'll need a biologist, too...pity all the experienced exobiologists were transferred so recently..."

"Take McCoy."

"That's a good idea. A yeoman to take notes, and a pilot."

"Any preference?"

Kirk shook his head. "Whoever's top of the duty roster will do fine."

"For the yeoman, I agree; not for a pilot. This could be a difficult flight - we don't know enough about the system to assume it'll be easy flying. Miss Masters will pilot."

"Yes, sir."

Spock saw themischief in Kirk's eyes and half smiled. "I know, Jim, perhaps I'm being over-cautious. But it could be dangerous - we don't know what eddies and magnetic currents might be in there, and...well..."

Kirk laid his hand over Spock's. "We won't take any unnecessary chances, Spock. I promise."

The shuttlecraft Galileo lifted out of the hangar deck with a half clumsy soar. If the Enterprise was an elegant swan gliding smoothly through space, the shuttlecraft were ducks - effective flyers but far from graceful.

Spock watched the ungainly little craft on the viewscreen, wishing, as it rapidly diminished in size, that he was in it.

Uhura swung round. "Report coming in from the Galileo, sir. They are having difficulty in obtaining any positive readings...there's static interference..." Spock could hear the crackling for himself. "I can barely read them, sir...something about they're being pulled off course..."

//Jim!//

There was no answer.

Spock drew a deep breath. This, if ever, was not the time to panic. "Get a fix on the Galileo, Mr. Sulu."

"I'm sorry, Captain. Something's disrupting the scanners. Nothing makes sense."

"Something wrong, Captain?"

Despite himself, Spock jumped. Recovering instantly, he swung round in the same movement.

Earth Commissioner Ferris stood there.

"Why do you ask, Commissioner?" Really, of all the inconvenient times for the man to take advantage of his right to come onto the bridge...

"I noticed that we appeared to have stopped; and since our journey to Babel is of the utmost priority..."

"We have three days in hand, Commissioner, and are taking advantage of the fact to investigate Murasaki 312 - according to our standing orders."

"I don't like it, Captain - nor, I am sure, will any of the other diplomats on board. This Babel conference is of the utmost priority..."

Spock was irresistably reminded of Nilz Baris, from the other universe; a little man with a high position who strove continuously to be as important as he thought he should be.

"I am well aware of that, Commissioner."

"Then why waste time with a mere exploration of a gaseous cloud? I'm quite sure, if you felt you had to stop and take readings, that a sensor scan from here would have been fully informative."

"Commissioner Ferris, Murasaki312 has already been documented in that fashion. Commander Kirk felt that a closer study was in order, and I agreed with his professional judgement."

"But now you've lost contact with the shuttle. You've lost your crew."

"We have two days to find them, and will still reach Babel the day before the conference."

"In all that?" Ferris indicated the screen. "Two days?"

"Are you suggesting that I just go away and leave them - sir?"

"I'm suggesting you shouldn't have sent them out there in the first place."

//Jim!// Again Spock directed his thoughts along the bondmate link. Nothing; either the distance was too great for their half formed bond, or the electric disturbances in the cloud disrupted the mental communication - thought itself being a form of electric energy.

"Sir," Uhura put in. "There is one planet in the system capable of sustaining life. It's listed as Taurus II - oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, bordering on Class M. As far as we can make out with the instruments malfunctioning, it's very nearly dead centre of the magnetic attraction of the cloud."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu - set course for Taurus II."

"Aye, sir." Sulu's hands moved over the console. "On course, sir."

The bridge door slid open again. Grimly, Spock glanced over. Selek stood there.

"What is happening, Spock? Why have we changed course?"

Ferris did not give Spock a chance to answer. "He sent out a team in a shuttlecraft to explore a gaseous cloud, Ambassador, in spite of the urgency of our mission. Now the shuttlecraft is lost, he's wasting more time looking for it."

Selek looked at Spock, ignoring Ferris.

"Essentially true, sir," Spock admitted. "Commander Kirk was anxious to investigate Murasaki 312 - it is one of the things listed in our standing orders to be explored whenever possible - and I saw no reason to deny him the opportunity, as we have time in hand."

Selek nodded. "I understand. But we must reach Babel on time."

"You will, sir. I will search while I can, then - if we have not found them - I will take you to Babel and then return to continue the search. May I count on your support to obtain permission to do so, sir?"

"Indeed, yes. Come, Commissioner - our presence is merely interfering with Captain Spock's search." He walked back to the turbolift, drawing Ferris after him.

It was a bumpy landing.

The crew picked themselves up from the floor of the shuttle where they had been thrown by the violence of the impact. McCoy sat up, feeling his head carefully, then moved quickly to Boma as he saw the blood on his face.

"I'm all right, Doctor," Boma said as McCoy wiped the blood from a tiny cut at his hairline and fixed a patch over it.

"Sure you are." McCoy moved on to Yeoman Mears. "All right, Yeoman?"

"I think so." She looked dazed but was clearly recovering quickly.

"Latimer? Gaetano?"

Nods answered him and he moved on to the front of the shuttle, where Kirk and Masters were already bending over the controls. "All right, Jim? Charlene?"

"Yes, Bones." Kirk straightened.

"What happened?"

It was the astrophysicist who answered. "I'd say it was the magnetic attraction of the cloud. It just pulled us in..."

"But the initial readings didn't show that amount of magnetism, Mr. Boma," Gaetano objected.

"Neither did any of the previous scan reports," Kirk said. "At a guess, the magnetic effect is variable. Agreed, Mr. Boma?"

"It could be," Boma replied. "An ion storm in the middle of a gaseous cloud...who knows just what it could do? A temporary magnetic attraction is more than probable."

Kirk turned to Masters. "How is it?" he asked.

"It's a mess," she answered gloomily.

"Can you do anything with it?"

"I don't know yet." She bent over the console again, checking several wires torn loose in the crash.

Kirk flicked the communications switch. "Kirk to Enterprise. Enterprise. Do you read me?"

"You're not really expecting them to hear you, are you?" Latimer asked.

Kirk glanced at him, noting the pale face, the tremor in the young voice. "It is only sensible to try everything available," he replied quietly. He stared at the silent console, utilising another method of communication that nobody here except McCoy knew about. //Spock!//

There was no answer, and he found himself wondering if a completely-formed bondmate link would be strong enough to make contact here. Possibly. But they did not have such a link. He hoped Selek would not be too suspicious of Spock's failure to know where his bondmate was.

"Bones, get me a reading on the atmosphere, please."

McCoy glanced at him. "I'll have to go outside to do it...and if the atmosphere's toxic, it'll get in as soon as I open the door."

"A chance we'll have to take. The life support inside the vessel will not sustain us indefinitely; I must know if we can breathe the air outside."

McCoy reached for his tricorder and headed for the door, pausing to glance through a port. "At least there's green vegetation out there," he said optimistically, and went on. A gust of not-very-pleasant air blew in as he opened the door. "Well, it's breathable," he said, checking. "I wouldn't recommend the place as a health resort - too much marsh gas in the atmosphere. But there is enough oxygen and nitrogen and trace gases in acceptable quantities to do us."

"Bones, is it really methane in the atmosphere?" Kirk asked anxiously. Well though he knew McCoy, he wasn't always certain when the doctor was being serious and when he was being unnecessarily facetious.

"No, Jim. But it sure smells like it."

"Well - unpleasant though the smell is, we'll become accustomed to it very quickly," Kirk commented. "I suggest we move outside and give Miss Masters more room to work. Mr. Latimer, Mr. Gaetano, please arm yourselves and scout the immediate area. Don't go out of sight of the ship."

"Aye, sir." They went to the arms locker for phasers, and, still fastening these to their belts, they jumped out of the shuttle and strode off.

"Jim," McCoy said slowly, "what are our chances of communicating with the Enterprise?"

Kirk shook his head. "I doubt we'll manage."

"You can't contact Spock?"

"I've tried. Nothing. I imagine he's been trying to reach me the same way, too."

"They will look for us, though."

"Yes, they'll look. But we have no communications; and if the magnetic effect that brought us here is as widespread as I think it possibly is, to pull us in from so far out, they'll be looking without instruments. That's time-consuming; and they only have two days, three if Spock can persuade the diplomats to cut their time in hand to nothing. After that, they'll have to leave to get our passengers to Babel."

"So you don't think they'll find us."

"Not as long as we're grounded." He glanced over at Charlene Masters. "Fortunately, we have an excellent engineer with us."

It took all of Spock's willpower to make him sit still. Not that pacing up and down ever did anyone any good, but at least it gave an illusion of

doing something... He opened his mouth to ask, yet again, if Sulu could not make some sense out of the swirling patterns that were all his sensors were picking up, and forced himself to remain silent.

Jim. Oh Jim - wherever you are, be careful.

He punched a button on the arm of his chair. "Transporter room - are the transporters operating yet?"

"Still disrupted, Captain," came Kyle's voice. "We tried beaming some boxes, and we've been unable to retrieve them. We wouldn't dare try it with people."

"Thank you." Spock could guess that Kyle was even now thinking of how impatient he was; if the transporters had been operating, of course he would have been told. Well, they couldn't wait much longer before doing something more positive than just sitting here waiting for conditions to return to normal - or whatever passed for normal in this area. Resolutely, he dismissed the fear that these conditions were normal for the region. "Mr. Chekov - what is the present condition of the magnetic effect?"

"If the present decrease in intensity continues unaltered, sir, it should be safe to launch search shuttlecraft in approximately ten minutes."

Assuming we don't have another flare-up of the magnetism, his thought continued. There had already been two minor fluctuations upwards while they waited - so minor that he had not bothered reporting them to the already over-worried Captain, recognising that anything at all that the crew could do to keep from adding to that worry could only benefit Spock's nerves. Not that he showed much, Chekov conceded; but the simple fact that anything at all showed was a clear indication to his devoted bridge crew, who knew of the depth of their Captain's friendship with his First Officer, that had he been Human, he would have been frantic.

Spock punched another button on his chair. "Hangar deck. Prepare all shuttlecraft for launch in ten minutes. You all know your co-ordinates?"

The voice of the senior pilot answered. "Yes, sir." They had been waiting for this order for several hours.

"You don't really think all this will work, do you?"

Spock jumped. When had Ferris come back onto the bridge? He recovered himself quickly. "I must try, Commissioner. These men include some of my senior officers." And my bondmate, he added in silent anguish. "Besides, a commanding officer who is seen to abandon his men without making every attempt to rescue them will quickly lose the trust of his remaining followers."

The intercon buzzed, and Spock left Ferris thinking it over as he answered. "Spock here."

"Shuttlecraft standing by for take-off, sir."

Spock glanced at Chekov. "Is it safe yet, Mr. Chekov?"

"Almost, sir. Another two minutes."

"Hangar deck - launch in three minutes. Spock out."

Kirk bent to glance under the control panel, where Masters was working with grim concentration. For a moment she remained unaware of him, then she glanced over.

"It's bad, Jim."

"I'd guessed that. How bad?"

"We might manage to take off; even to remain in orbit for a while. But there's no way we can reach escape velocity. If we tried, we'd tear the last

of the engine to bits. No, Jim - we're stuck here unless the Enterprise manages to find us."

"You're right," Kirk said slowly. "There's no point in even trying to take off if we're just going to have to come down again." He thought about it for a moment. "Well, we can use the shuttle for a base, for somewhere to sleep. But we're going to have to find water, and see if we can find anything edible in the vicinity. I wonder if Latimer and Gaetano have seen anything... Where are they?"

The others looked round. "You told them scout around," McCoy reminded him.

"Yes - but to stay within sight of the ship. Where are they?" He took a deep breath. "LATIMER! GAETANO!"

There was no reply.

Kirk was aware of anger. "Spread out," he ordered. "Don't go out of sight of the ship - but see if you can find any traces of them."

He, Boma, McCoy and Mears scattered, moving hesitantly over the rocky ground. This was not a good place to stay, Kirk registered. There were some plants, but they were mostly shrubs; the ground itself was a mixture of rocks and sand, with only a few tufts of dry grass fighting a dreary battle for survival. Perhaps they could manage to fly the shuttlecraft to a more hospitable site, where food and water were more obviously to be found.

"Jim! Over here!"

McCoy. Kirk ran. The party gathered beside the doctor.

A phaser lay on the ground. There was no sign of its owner. Kirk looked round. What looked like faint tracks led off, away from the shuttle. He scooped up the phaser, and turned to follow the tracks. "This way - but be careful."

They had gone about two hundred yards when they found Latimer. He was sitting leaning against a rock, grinning stupidly.

"Latimer! Latimer!!"

The geologist grinned up at them. He tried to speak, but all they could hear was a meaningless babble...a babble that seemed to have words in it, but words that they could not understand.

"Where's Gaetano?" Even as he asked, Kirk knew that they would not receive a coherent answer. He glanced at the others. "Get Latimer back to the shuttle," he ordered. "Do what you can for him, Bones."

"Where are you going?" McCoy demanded.

"I'll go on a little further, see if I can find any sign of Mr. Gaetano."

"What if...this...happens to you, too? We're depending on you, you know - you're in command."

Kirk grinned. "Have you forgotten so soon all that Spock taught me? Nothing's going to steal my mind in a hurry."

McCoy looked doubtful. It was one thing to be confident, and McCoy knew well enough that the man who was not confident was more than half beaten before he began; it was quite another to be over confident, and he was afraid that Kirk might be trusting too completely to what Spock had taught him. But Boma was already moving to obey orders; McCoy shrugged mentally, and moved to join him.

Boma paused as he reached Latimer, looking after the departing Kirk. "Do you think he really is that confident, Doc, or is he just trying to keep our morale up?"

"I don't know," McCoy said honestly. "A bit of both, probably. Yeah, I

know he's young, but don't let that fool you; he knows what he's doing. Come on, let's get Latimer back to the shuttle."

Uhura looked round from her console. "Captain, the Columbus reports negative results from the land mass she has been searching."

The Columbus was searching an area composed of several large islands. "Have them proceed to the next island, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"Any word from engineering on the sensors?"

"Still unreliable, sir."

Spock repressed a frustrated sigh. Was there nothing useful that he could do?

"Captain."

Spock consciously ran through a quick Vulcan mental exercise designed to encourage calmness in time of slight stress. It enabled him to answer quietly. "Yes, Commissioner."

"While I do not welcome the thought of abandoning your crewmen, I must remind you..."

"Vulcans do not forget, Commissioner; nor do they require Humans to remind them of the passage of time."

"Your passengers are becoming concerned at the delay, Captain. They agreed that I should speak to you about it."

"I am quite certain that Ambassador Selek was not among those who are... 'concerned'." Watching Ferris, he saw the faint flush.

"Well, no," Ferris conceded. "He simply said, 'Captain Spock known his duty, and will do it'." He did not, Spock was sure, use the tone of voice that the Captain was certain his uncle had used. "But Ambassador Petri..."

"Ambassador Petri would dearly like to see Commander Kirk lying dead at his feet," Spock said, almost viciously. "Did you not know that? The last time he was aboard, he challenged Commander Kirk to a duel, according to Troyian custom, and was defeated. He has not forgotten. Bearing that in mind, would you consider anything he has to say in this matter other than petty spite?"

Ferris stared at him. He had obviously not known that, and seemed torn between wanting to maintain his inflexible position as spokesman - probably self-appointed - for the various diplomats and unwillingness to seem as if he sided with Petri's vindictiveness. His own inflexibility won. "You have twenty-four hours, Captain."

Spock looked at him. "Twenty-four hours and two minutes."

Ferris glared at him, then turned and strode out. It was a very minor victory, and a wholly hollow one.

Charlene Masters was bending over the console, arms buried deep inside it, when Boma and McCoy returned, half carrying the witless Latimer. They helped him to a seat in the rear of the shuttle, where he sat unaware of his surrounding, muttering incoherently to himself. The sound attracted Masters' attention and she glanced round, then looked enquiringly at McCoy, who shrugged.

"We found him like this. There was no sign of Gaetano. Jim's gone on to see if he can find him."

Masters frowned. "Odd. What could turn an intelligent man into a

babbling idiot so quickly?"

McCoy shook his head. "Perhaps Gaetano will be able to tell us something if - when - Jim finds him. Meanwhile, I can find nothing organically wrong with Latimer, and I don't have the equipment here to do a proper brain scan. I'm helpless until we can get back to the Enterprise."

She nodded and returned the console.

"How are you getting on?" McCoy asked.

She straightened again. "With a lightened load we could achieve orbit. We couldn't maintain it long, but once we were up there we could contact the Enterprise with more chance of success. I could jury rig the communications equipment to give short-range contact."

McCoy came straight to the point. "How much lighter?"

"Five hundred pounds."

McCoy made a face. "That's a lot."

"I know. There's practically no excess equipment on a shuttlecraft, either."

She turned back to the control panel.

Kirk strode away from the others, wishing he were even half as confident as he had tried to appear. The mission which had started out so hopefully, and which he had expected to provide much valuable information on which he could work during the tedious wait at Babel while the various dignitaries argued over whatever it was that such people felt it necessary to argue over, had gone terribly, dangerously wrong. Yet this planet should have been a reasonable enough place to stay even although the Enterprise had to leave them while she took the diplomats to Babel. His nose had already adjusted to the invidious stink. There was vegetation - the ground across which he was now walking was green, with healthy-looking grass and an increasing number of bushes. Where there was plant life, there was bound to be water. As long as they had adequate water, they could survive for several weeks even if they could find nothing to eat other than what was contained in the shuttle's survival packs.

But he could no longer assume that the planet was a reasonable place to stay. Something had stolen Latimer's mind, had lured Gaetano away...was luring him away too? No. He was searching for the missing Gaetano, and in full control of his own actions.

He looked to right and left as he went, occasionally turning to glance behind him, but seeing nothing unusual. A small scaly creature scuttled for shelter a short distance away from him, and he made a mental note of at least sparse evolution to the reptile stage.

He became aware of a dawning apprehension, and stopped. He looked carefully around. He could see nothing out of the ordinary; grass, an inch or two long, still showing the faint trail of someone passing, the crushed stems slowly straightening again; the bushes clumped here and there; a few trees raising their crowns high. Something small moved against the green background; a brownish-green shape that leaped high, covering fully two feet in a single hop, then vanished again into the grass, obviously disturbed by his presence. So - this world had proto-insect life at least, too, although the plants did not seem to have evolved into flowering species yet. He was still wondering if any of these proto-insects could fly when he heard an uneven droning, and glanced round to see a fairly large bee-like creature blundering along just above the grass, occasionally colliding with one of the longer stems until it gave up and sank down, apparently exhausted, to rest.

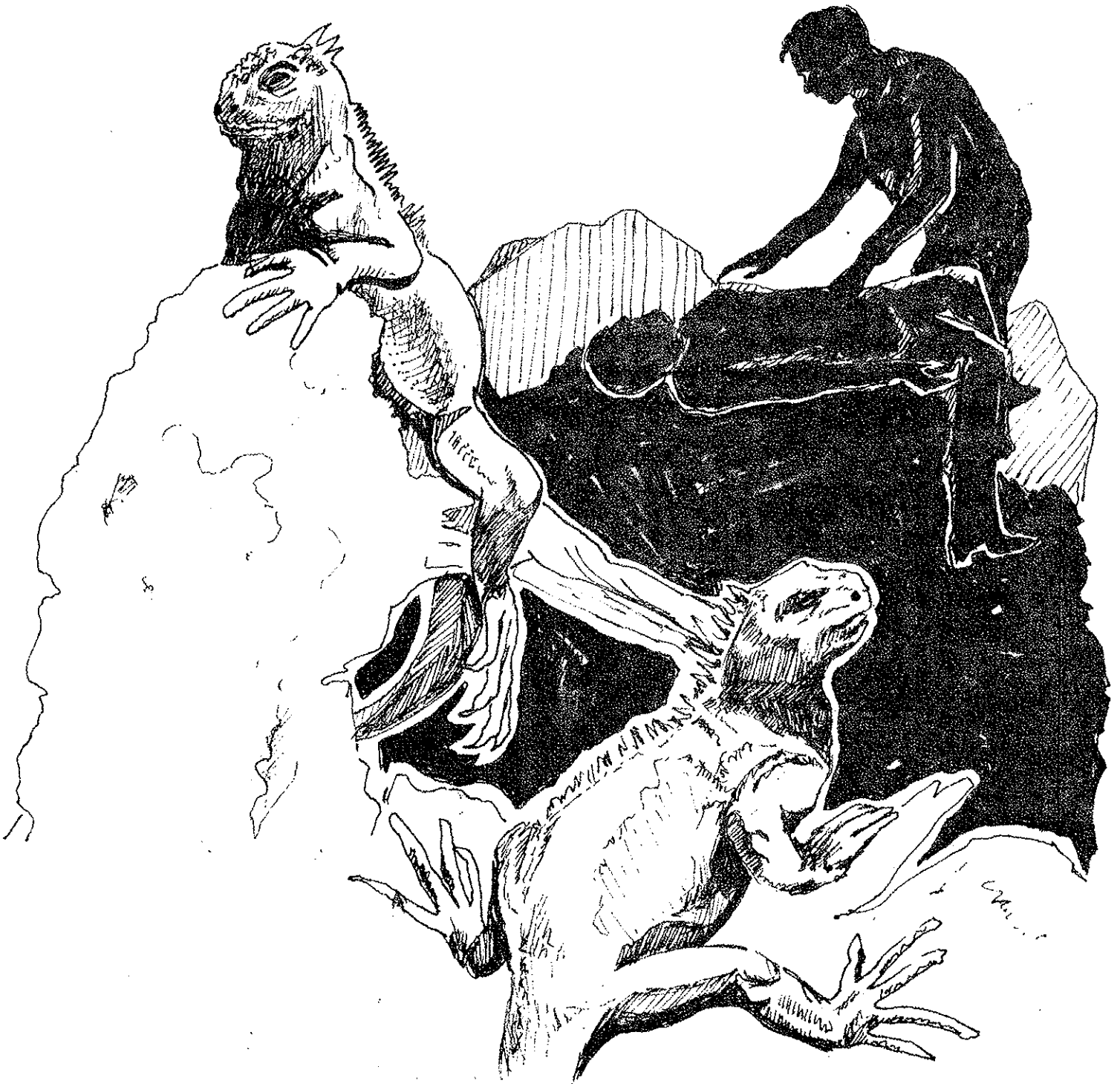
He moved on.

Ahead of him, he saw a break in the even carpet of green; a patch of blue. He ran forward - and stopped abruptly.

Gaetano lay there, obviously dead, an expression of utter terror on his face.

Kirk stared round, hand automatically reaching for his phaser. What had Gaetano seen? It couldn't have been so very long ago; yet...

Kirk shook his head, trying to think logically. This was a planet still at an early stage in evolution, possibly just about to enter an age of reptiles, Kirk estimated on the basis of what he had seen so far. Anything Gaetano had seen that had - apparently - frightened him to death, was not going to be



afraid of another Human, and would certainly make to attack any other Human it saw. But... If some carnivore had so terrified Gaetano, why hadn't it begun to eat him once he was dead?

There seemed to be no answer.

There were a couple of the little lizard-like creatures fairly near, and they didn't seem to be afraid...although Kirk noticed that they seemed to be keeping an eye on him. He smiled ruefully. That was hardly surprising; he was so large in comparison to them that they were probably quite nervous of him - assuming a carnivore large enough, or vicious enough, to prey on them. As yet he had no proof that anything large and/or predatory did live there. Though it did seem quite logical to assume that at some point early in evolution, the harmless and inoffensive had no enemies.

But if everything here was harmless or inoffensive, what had frightened Gaetano so?

Another heavy proto-bee floundered past, distracting him for a moment from the merry-go-round of conflicting thoughts; and when he looked back, the little lizards were gone.

Gaetano's body was still warm, and curved easily over his shoulder as he lifted it. He headed back towards the landing site, moving steadily in spite of the weight of the dead man.

Mears saw him coming, and immediately called to the others. He knew instantly that something was wrong; and guessed, from the dejection in Masters' body, what it was.

"Trouble?" He put Gaetano's body down carefully.

"I thought I'd managed to fix the engines so that we could at least take off," she said gloomily. "Then I found that we've practically no fuel left. One of the fuel feed lines was fractured."

"Hmm. Well, that solves one problem - whether or not to stay here till the Enterprise finds us."

McCoy looked up from the body. "He seems to have died from heart failure, Jim - possibly occasioned by fear," he added, looking at the expression on the dead face. "He must have seen something that terrified him."

Kirk shook a puzzled head. "But what? I didn't see anything capable of terrifying a mouse, let alone a grown man." He thought over his short trip in search of the missing man. "I saw one or two small lizards, a couple of bees and a grasshopper. None of these could have frightened him."

"People have some queer phobias, Jim," McCoy pointed out.

"Granted, but how many people with a phobia powerful enough to kill them could get through Starfleet's psychology tests?"

"Depends on the phobia," McCoy said gloomily. "I remember one case, a few years ago, when I was serving on the Defiant. Steady as anything - I'd have sworn that man didn't have a nerve in his body. Then one day he was on landing party duty - a simple routine mission, no problems...and I saw that man turned into a gibbering idiot by the sight of an army of ants picking over a dead bird. Turned out that as a child he'd been attacked by an army of soldier ants and quite badly bitten. He'd been rescued by his parents, who'd managed to get rid of the ants swarming over him by dousing him in water, and he had no conscious memory of the incident. He'd come across ants before and they hadn't worried him - it was seeing them stripping that bird of flesh that triggered off the terror. It took us ages to find all that out too, I may add. Now I grant you that's an extreme - and unusual - case... but if someone hadn't been with him, saw how he was going and did something about it, would he have been frightened to death, without anyone knowing the

reason?"

"There was nothing like that around where Gaetano was. Just a couple of the lizards...and a bee flew along while I was there. There's another puzzle too, Bones - why did he go off like that? Did he go off before Latimer went insane, or after? And what drove Latimer insane?"

McCoy shook his head. "I don't know. He's still completely incoherent." He glanced round nervously. "I don't know about you, but I keep feeling there's someone watching us."

Mears nodded. "I feel that too," she said nervously. "I keep wanting to look over my shoulder to see who's following me."

Kirk glanced at Boma. "What about you?"

"I'd be happier if we knew what had killed Gaetano," he said bluntly.

"Charlene?"

"I'm all right, but I've been inside the shuttle, and busy. Even if someone was watching us, I'd probably not be aware of it."

"Well, I didn't see any sign of large life forms, though the lizards looked as if they weren't too sure of anything my size. Back on Earth, the wild life of remote islands completely lacked the fear reflex, and it destroyed them...but the creatures here do seem to possess the fear reflex at least sufficiently strongly to make them wary, so presumably they know of something large enough to be a danger to them. Whether it's large enough to be a danger to us, of course, is something we can't know without seeing it."

"Transporter room to bridge."

"Bridge; Spock here."

"The transporters seem to be working at full efficiency now, sir."

"Security - beam down search parties immediately. Post your men in pairs over as wide an area as possible."

"Aye, sir."

It was a big planet. It would be sheer luck if any of the men sent down found any sign of the Galileo this soon. But he had to try. Privately, he pinned more hope on the searching shuttlecraft.

Charlene had returned to her apparently futile task of going over the engine. McCoy kept watch over the sedated Latimer. Mears took notes of what she could observe from the immediate vicinity of the shuttle, while Kirk and Boma buried the dead Gaetano.

Kirk patted the last sod into place and sighed. "It was such a useless death."

Boma glanced uneasily over his shoulder, then murmured, "He looks lonely there."

"Perhaps; but I don't think it's likely to worry him, and I'd prefer it if he didn't have company."

"No, sir." He glanced round again, licking his lips nervously.

"What's wrong, Mr. Boma?"

"I...don't know, sir. I keep getting this feeling of being watched."

Kirk glanced round in his turn. "I don't see anything, and there isn't much shelter anywhere around."

"I know, sir...but there's something there. I know it. And it's

dangerous."

"We should be safe enough inside the shuttle." Kirk headed back towards it. After a moment, Boma followed.

Inside the shuttle, Masters looked up, an expression of guarded optimism on her face. "Jim, I think I can get us mobile."

"I thought the current problem was lack of fuel," Kirk asked.

"Yes, but I can use an alternative fuel supply. The biggest problem was patching the broken feed line. But I can by-pass the fractured line - luckily the Galileo is an older model; the new design incorporates an 'improvement' that would make it impossible. Then I can use the power packs from the phasers as an alternative fuel. I'll need to drain the power into the Galileo's cells, which will take some time, but I can do it."

"How long will it take, Charlene?"

"Near enough twenty-four hours, sir." An official report. "I can't speed up the time it will take to drain the phasers."

"Can you do anything about communications while the phasers are draining?"

"Sorry, sir, I've already done all I can. The damage is too extensive for anything approaching an efficient repair; it needs several replacement units. Once we make orbit, we'll have short range contact but that's all."

"All right, Miss Masters; carry on. Gentlemen, give your phasers to Miss Masters, please."

"But they're our only defence against whatever is out there," Boma complained.

"At the moment, Mr. Boma, whatever is 'out there' exists only inside our imaginations," Kirk pointed out. "We have as yet seen nothing that could endanger us."

"Gaetano did," Boma muttered. "And Latimer saw something too."

"I'm forced to agree with Boma," McCoy said quietly. "Can't we give Charlene the phasers one at a time, and retain the others for defence as long as possible?"

"We'll need as much power from the phasers as possible if we're to achieve orbit," Masters put in. "As a fuel, the power from the phasers is far less efficient than the proper stuff."

"Give Miss Masters the phasers," Kirk repeated. "We should be safe enough from...anything...inside the shuttle. If we keep the door open, life support will be no problem; we are in a clear area, and will see anything approaching long before it arrives."

Reluctantly, they obeyed. Kirk moved to the door, and jumped down, gazing towards a distant clump of trees. McCoy joined him.

"You're not thinking of going exploring just because you don't feel you're being watched, are you?" he asked bluntly.

Kirk smiled slightly. "It does seem a pity to waste the opportunity, Bones." His smile widened. "Look."

One of the proto-bees was bumbling along. McCoy watched it for a moment, then turned his tricorder onto it. He checked the reading.

"Hmm. That could be quite a deadly little thing, Jim. It has a sting that could pack quite a punch even for someone our size; it must be lethal to anything small that it stings."

"But it doesn't look aggressive. Which means that it has evolved a defence against larger enemies."

"Jim, you're making a basic mistake which, as a scientist, you shouldn't make. It could just as easily be an offensive weapon; used to kill possible prey. Just because it looks like a bumble-bee, and that unsteady flying looks cute, you're prepared to take it too much at face value. I'm on this trip as biologist, remember, and as biologist I'm reminding you that what looks harmless in nature isn't necessarily so. Even on Earth, some insects have rather nasty bites or stings. People have died of - say - wasp stings, yet hardly anyone thinks of wasps as dangerous - they're regarded as rather bad-tempered little so-and-sos with painful stings; a nuisance rather than a danger."

Kirk looked at him. "You're right, Bones." He surveyed the landscape. "The whole place looks so beautiful, though...I haven't seen anything higher on the evolutionary scale than lizards, and even the insect life is primitive, barely able to fly yet...the plants don't seem to have reached the stage of producing flowers, which would mean, right enough, that there are no harmless nectar-eaters...but everything looks harmless."

"And something among your harmless creatures terrified one man to death and left another a mindless imbecile."

"You shouldn't have had to remind me of that," Kirk admitted. He watched the proto-bee sink into the grass near his feet and then vanish into a tiny hole in the ground. "It's getting dark. We'll stay inside the shuttle - with the door closed - during the hours of darkness." He looked around again. "But tomorrow we must look for water, whatever else we do. Even if Charlene can get us off the ground by late tomorrow, we'll need something to drink before that."

"Ration the supply in the shuttle," McCoy suggested as they turned back to re-enter the small vehicle.

"Not enough," Kirk said succinctly. "When the fuel line fractured, it contaminated the main water tank. We only have what's in the portable container."

McCoy looked at him. "Charlene told you?"

"She didn't want to worry anyone else."

"She should have told me. I'm the doctor, dammit."

"Probably. But you were busy with Latimer at the time."

McCoy grunted, and swung himself into the shuttle. Kirk gave one last look around, noting the presence of a couple of the little lizards about a hundred yards away, just visible in the gathering dusk, and followed, wondering if the little creatures always went about in pairs, and if so, whether they were in fact mates. It seemed unlikely that he would find out.

As his watch ended, Spock reluctantly handed over command to Sulu and made for his quarters. His inclination was to remain on the bridge, but he knew that at the moment he could do little; if he was needed, Sulu knew where to contact him.

He walked briskly out of the turbo lift and headed down the corridor, nodding a polite acknowledgement of the greeting given him by a passing crewman. Once inside his cabin, however, he sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Jim. Oh, Jim.

He permitted himself only a moment of relaxation, then resolutely straightened and turned to his desk. There was work that he still had to do, routine reports to be filed...including one on today's events. Reluctantly, he began to formulate that report.

The buzzer interrupted him before he had finished the first sentence. Torn between irritation and relief, he looked up. "Come."

Selek entered. Spock drew a deep breath, instinctively knowing that this interview was probably going to be difficult. In public, Selek would support his decisions; here, in private... Spock wasn't sure that he would not have preferred Ferris.

"Is there no word, Spock?"

The Captain shook his head. "Nothing. The sensors are still inoperative, the search shuttles have covered less than a quarter of the planet, the ground search has had to be called off over the main continent because of approaching darkness; and communications has failed to elicit a reply."

"What of the bonding link?"

"Nothing. It is possible that the electrical disturbances in the surrounding space are sufficient to disrupt even telepathic communication."

Selek looked thoughtful. "It is possible," he conceded slowly.

"I am quite sure that James, too, has tried to reach me through the bonding link," Spock went on. He allowed his fear for the Human to show briefly on his face, aware that too great control would seem suspicious to the older Vulcan, even although it was only the control learned as a child that was enabling him to remain functioning.

"You are sure that he is not dead?"

Yes, Selek was suspicious of their loss of contact. Had he been less alert Spock thought he might have made an incautious answer and thus betrayed them instantly. "He cannot be," he replied quietly. "If he were, I might live, since he is Human and I, only half Vulcan; but I would not be able to function rationally. Even if I had not felt his death, my mind would know it." That at least was true, he thought.

"Of course." Selek seemed satisfied by the comment.

"As it is, I am finding the lack of contact unsettling," Spock added. "And Commissioner Ferris is not helping by his continual visits to the bridge, 'reminding' me of how time is passing. I could almost believe that he is glad that this had happened; that he would be glad to hear that my men had been killed or were irretrievably lost."

"Surely not," Selek protested.

"He was opposed to our stopping in the first place. It seems to me that he is currently occupied in saying 'I told you so'; that he would be glad of the opportunity to do so more forcefully. He is not a man who can hold a high position gracefully."

"That is so," Selek agreed. "I have encountered Mr. Ferris before. He is ... 'in love with his own importance', as your mother once described a petty official in my hearing. It is quite an apt comment; I have never forgotten it."

"It would be of considerable assistance to me if you could keep Mr. Ferris off the bridge," Spock said. "I can ignore him...but if he were to 'throw his weight about', as James would say, with Mr. Sulu, he could do some damage."

"Of course," Selek agreed.

"The electrical disturbance is easing," Spock went on. "But very slowly. I may have to leave, to take you to Babel, before it eases sufficiently to allow me to re-establish contact with James." As well to leave Selek thinking that he believed that to be the cause of his inability to contact Kirk. "Until that happens, I must search by whatever means are open to me, no matter how inefficient those means may appear. It would be impossible for me not to do so."

"Yes, of course," Selek agreed.

The night passed slowly. Charlene Masters worked steadily for several hours after Boma and Mears settled down to obtain what sleep they could; Kirk remained alert in case there was anything he could do to assist the Engineer; McCoy fussed over the sleeping Latimer. Finally Masters looked up. "I can't do anything more," she said simply. "I've fixed the power packs to drain; they can do that whether I'm paying attention to them or not." She yawned. "I think I'll get some sleep too, Jim."

Kirk nodded. "Yes." He glanced over at McCoy, who was now sitting staring moodily at his patient. "You can't do anything more either, Bones. Grab some sleep while you can. I'm going to."

McCoy grunted. "Someone should stay on guard."

"Against what?" Kirk asked, slightly amused.

"Against whatever killed Gaetano and stole Latimer's sanity."

"Bones, we're shut in here. Nothing outside could possibly get in. We haven't seen anything bigger than a lizard a few inches high - how could anything that size possibly reach the door release, let alone have the strength to press it?"

"I know, I know - but I'm worried, just the same. You said the lizards seemed nervous."

"Well, yes, but dammit, something two feet high would be a danger to them," Kirk pointed out, "but still not be big enough to endanger us while we're in here."

McCoy subsided, grumbling slightly to himself. Kirk smiled and dimmed the light, leaving only the emergency roof light to keep the dark at bay.

//Spock!// He tried once more to reach his friend's mind, but received no reply. With a resigned sigh he curled up on his seat, and dozed off.

"Jim! Jim!"

"What's wrong, Bones?" Kirk blinked heavy eyes open.

"Latimer's gone!"

"What?" He sat up sharply, shock dissipating the last drowsiness instantly.

"The door was open. I don't know when he wandered off, or why, but he was gone when I woke. Boma has gone to see if he can find any trace of him."

Kirk became aware that Mears and Masters were still in the shuttle and were watching him uncertainly.

"Why didn't you waken me sooner?"

"Because you wouldn't waken," McCoy said bluntly. "You were sleeping like... well, like you'd been drugged."

"I was?" Usually he slept lightly, a habit acquired through years of insecurity. Well, time enough to consider that later. He went to the door.

Boma was scouting round barely a hundred yards away. Kirk crossed to him. "Anything?"

"I can't see any tracks...sir." Boma's voice was barely a tone off insolent.

Kirk looked sharply at him. "You think I should have mounted a guard, Mr. Boma?"

"Something got in and took Latimer away...sir."

"Or Mr. Latimer left of his own accord," Kirk suggested.

"I don't think so - sir. Latimer didn't seem able to make any independent

action."

"Last night. He might have recovered during the night."

"I would doubt that, Commander," McCoy said. "Latimer's mind seemed completely gone."

Kirk looked round without replying. "Well, we'd better see if we can find him. Miss Masters, continue working on the engines. I don't doubt that you've already made a completely efficient repair under the circumstances, but the slightest improvement you can make can only increase our safety margin. Everyone else, spread out. Be careful. Try to keep someone else in sight of you at all times."

Unwilling, they scattered.

Kirk set off, his mind a prey to uncertainty. He could see no reason for the suspicion/hostility that was being directed at him by Boma in particular. As far as he knew, neither Latimer nor Gaetano had been particularly friendly with Boma; the astrophysicist had no axe to grind as far as they were concerned. Unless...was the man afraid, and masking his fear with bravado? It was possible.

He studied the terrain closely as he went, watching for the splash of blue that would be so conspicuous here in this world of unrelieved green and withered brown, watching for McCoy on one side of him, Mears on the other.

"Commander!"

It was Mears, her voice sounding unsteady. He turned and ran towards where she stood, staring downwards.

Latimer lay there, obviously dead. His body had been partially eaten by something; there were big gashes on the uneaten arm where sharp teeth or claws had torn at him. His face held no pain, no terror; just the same blank unawareness that had marked his expression yesterday.

McCoy dropped to his knees to examine the body. "He might have been dead before whatever it was found him and made a meal of him," he said quietly as Boma pounded up. "But I wouldn't like to guarantee it."

"So we'll never know what happened," Kirk mused. "What was wrong with him, or..."

"Is that all it means to you?" Boma demanded. "Just a mystery you can't solve?"

Kirk looked steadily at the older man. "No, Mr. Boma, that is not all it means," he said coldly.

"Whatever it was is going to kill all of us if we stay here," Boma went on harshly. "It's watching us now, waiting its chance..."

"Mr. Boma, you have too vivid an imagination," Kirk said sharply. Yes, the man was frightened.

"Boma's right," Mears said. Her voice was trembling on the brink of hysteria. "We are being watched. Whatever is watching us wants us dead."

"If we are being watched, it is more likely that whatever is watching us merely wants us to go away," Kirk said reasonably. "But I am far from certain that we are being watched. I think you are all letting your imaginations run away with you. The planet is - as far as we can see - uninhabited, except by creatures not very high up the evolutionary scale. It's all very quiet - too quiet, perhaps. We're not used to it, and our minds in part reject it. Would you agree with that assessment, Doctor?"

"Well...yes and no," McCoy said. "Yes, the mind can play tricks on us, and humanity does reject - at a subconscious level - the idea of complete aloneness. Even loners like to know that company is there if they should want it. So even an imaginary watcher fills a psychological blank. But I, too,

feel that we are being watched, and by something inimical. I feel apprehension, for no good reason that I can see."

Kirk looked round steadily. "The only living things in sight - apart from ourselves - are three of those little lizards."

Mears looked over towards them, and drew her breath in with a sharp sound that was almost a scream. She stood motionless for a moment, then turned and ran for the shuttle.

"Yeoman!"

She ignored Kirk's cry and ran on. McCoy started after her, Boma at his heels. Kirk took a deep, frustrated breath, and bent to haul Latimer's body over his shoulder. They might as well bury what was left of the man beside Gaetano.

As he walked away, he noticed that the lizards had again made themselves scarce.

Spock had resumed the bridge, unable to remain in his cabin any longer. Not that he was doing anything positive on the bridge either, but at least it gave him the illusion of activity.

Uhura swung round from her console. "Captain, one of the landing parties has beamed back aboard... One of the men is in an unstable mental condition; his partner thought it best to return him immediately to the ship."

"Put the man on visual, Lieutenant."

"Lt. Kelowitz, Captain."

"What happened, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know, sir. We'd split up to cover slightly more ground, and were keeping in touch by communicator - the place appears to be almost completely deserted. Just a few lizards and insects about. When Imamura didn't answer my call, I went to look for him - found him sitting against a rock and babbling about Paradise. He didn't even seem to be aware that I was there. So I contacted the ship, sir."

"Very well. You saw nothing that could have accounted for Lt. Imamura's condition?"

"No, sir. I wondered at first if he'd come across some hallucinogenic plant, but it all seems to be ordinary grass and bushes - the tricorder didn't show anything out of the ordinary."

Spock frowned slightly. He was interrupted by Uhura. "Sir, another report - this time they have one dead, sir. They're beaming up."

"Lt. Kelowitz, stand by for further orders."

"Aye, sir."

"Ly. Uhura, put the survivor of the second party on."

"Aye, sir...Lt. Garrovick, sir."

"Report, Lieutenant."

"There's nothing much to report, sir. We were about a hundred yards apart, making for some high ground that was going to give us a good all-round view of the area we'd drawn, when I heard Ensign O'Neill scream. Just once, sir, a single terrified scream. When I looked round, he was down; by the time I reached him, he was dead. Sir, he looked scared out of his wits. But there wasn't anything to be scared of. Just grass and trees and a few insects."

Spock's frown intensified. "Tricorder readings?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, sir. But..."

"Well?"

"Sir, I did get the feeling that I was being watched. Nothing definite, just a sensation that someone was watching me."

"The tricorder showed nothing out of the ordinary," Spock reminded him.

"I know, sir. I realise I must have been imagining things, but...well... it was a very positive sensation, and it did worry me a bit."

Kelowitz broke in. "Sir, I had the same feeling. But my tricorder didn't show up anything either."

"How close were your two parties?" Spock asked.

In the transporter room, the two men looked at each other. "I was at bearing 387 mark 4," Garrovick said.

"I was at 179 mark 8," Kelowitz added. "Nowhere near Garrovick."

"You detected no intelligent life forms?"

"None, sir," Garrovick said.

"The lizards read like they might have incipient intelligence," Kelowitz said. He sounded a little doubtful.

"Very well, gentlemen. You saw no sign of the Galileo at either of your landing sites?"

"No, sir."

"Then have yourselves beamed to another area and search it. And be careful, gentlemen."

They buried Latimer in a shallow grave dug by Kirk. Not even McCoy was willing to expose himself for long enough to assist him. Mears had collapsed in tears inside the shuttlecraft, but finally pulled herself together; Boma and McCoy helped cover Latimer's body - a task which took relatively little time - and all three retired to the shelter of the Galileo.

Kirk stood in the doorway and looked at the others. "We need water," he said quietly.

Mears shuddered. "I'd rather go thirsty," she said unsteadily.

Kirk sighed. "Yeoman, if you could tell us what frightened you..."

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I felt threatened - but all I could see were the lizards, and it couldn't have been them...could it?"

"Yeoman, they are - at most - six inches tall. Hardly big enough to be a danger to anyone," Kirk pointed out. "My tricorder readings show them to be completely harmless."

"Mears is right," Boma said roughly. "They were warning us about something, I'm sure."

"Warning us and frightening us aren't the same thing," Kirk said wearily. He looked over to McCoy. "Bones, do your readings indicate where the nearest water is?"

McCoy waved roughly behind the shuttlecraft. "About half a mile that way," he said.

"Then I'll take the container and go for some," Kirk decided.

"I'll come with you," McCoy offered.

Kirk looked at him and smiled, appreciating the courage that pushed aside fear - even an imaginary fear. "All right, Bones - I'll be glad of your company. The rest of you, stay in the shuttle."

"Yes, sir," Mears acknowledged.

The two men set off briskly. Once they had gone far enough to be completely out of earshot, Kirk said, "What do you think, Bones?"

"I'm not sure what to think," McCoy said frankly. "I agree with the others; I feel we're being watched, and I feel apprehensive. You, on the other hand, feel nothing?"

Kirk shook his head. "The first time I was out, when I was looking for Gaetano, I was aware of a slight apprehension, but nothing out of the ordinary; nothing I wouldn't have expected to feel when faced by something mysterious and inexplicable. I certainly didn't - and don't - have any sensation of being watched."

McCoy looked at him. "Jim, you have one advantage denied to most Humans."

"What's that?"

"Vulcan training. Spock taught you how to shield your mind - how to close it to any outside influence."

Kirk looked at him thoughtfully. "Bones, are you saying that I'm ignoring a danger the rest of you are aware of? That I automatically close my mind to anything that might threaten me...?"

"It's possible. Look at it this way, Jim - for a long time you were living on your nerves, with fear a constant companion. You suffered considerable mental torture - you came, I'd say, to think of real pain as mental. The physical abuse you suffered - that was nothing, was it, compared to the mental abuse?"

Slowly, Kirk nodded.

"Then you learned mental control. You've been applying it ever since. Oh, not as completely or as thoroughly as Spock does, but you're far more controlled than is normal among Humans. And you do still tend to run away from any situation that you feel threatens your peace of mind."

"Only when I think I might hurt someone else," Kirk protested.

"Jim, you can try to avoid hurting others, but you can't live your entire life by that...you can't let that control how you live your life. But that's beside the point. We feel that something is watching us - threatening us. You don't. Could it be because at the first touch of awareness of danger, you retreated behind those barriers of yours?"

Kirk looked at him. "I don't know..." he said. He set his lips, and concentrated. "Bones, the only barrier in my mind right now is the automatic one that cuts off the background mush of emotions that telepaths pick up. It also acts to shield a nearby telepath from my emotions. Just a normal shield. I'll try to drop it..."

McCoy watched him silently for a moment. He looked round. "Hmmm. I see what you mean, Bones. A definite feeling of being watched. But there isn't any malice behind it; just caution."

They walked on.

Beside the water, they found one of the little lizards. It was lying motionless, its eyes open, and in them, startling for an animal, was an expression of helplessness...then, slowly, euphoria took the place of the more negative emotion.

"That's...like Latimer," McCoy whispered.

One of the proto-bees flew up from beside the little body, flying more strongly than any Kirk had yet seen. McCoy watched it go, a puzzled expression on his face.

"What is it?" Kirk asked.

"I'm not sure," McCoy replied. "Something I ought to remember..."

They filled the water container once McCoy had checked that the water was pure, and drank deeply, then headed back towards the shuttle. Neither felt inclined to linger despite the pleasantness of their surroundings - the terrain here, near the water, was thick with lush vegetation. Their noses had long acclimated to the stink.

Part way back, McCoy stopped dead. A group of lizards was crossing their path - lizards much bigger than the ones they had so far seen. One of them looked round, and McCoy shuddered at sight of their cruel fangs. It was undoubtedly one of these that had partly eaten Latimer.

Kirk glanced at him in some surprise. "What's wrong, Bones?"

"Those lizards."

"What about them? They look perfectly normal to me - a bigger group than we've seen up to now... Now what the...?"

The group of lizards had scattered and were running as if for their lives. McCoy gasped as they suddenly shrank down to normal size.

"Something's terrified them!" Kirk exclaimed. "But what?"

A proto-bee was flying after one of the lizards, showing a far greater turn of speed and flying ability than Kirk would have believed possible from what he had seen of them so far. McCoy suddenly grasped at his head, gasping in pain; the bee half hesitated, and then flew on. The lizard disappeared in the long lush grass; the bee vanished after it. A moment later, McCoy lowered his hands slowly.

Kirk raised his half-lowered shields again. "Well, that answers one question," he said wryly. "The lizards are telepathic, probably on a very basic level...and the bees prey on them."

They walked on soberly.

Back at the shuttle, they were greeted with relief by Boma and Mears, who looked slightly calmer, and Masters, brisk as always.

"We should manage to take off in about an hour," she reported as Kirk issued a much-needed ration of water;

"Fine," Kirk said. "And we've found out something of what's been bothering everyone; those little lizards are telepathic, possibly unconsciously so, and broadcast a sort of telepathic distress signal if they feel themselves in danger. At least, that's the nearest hypothesis we can come up with."

"Sir - will the Enterprise still be there when we get off the ground?" Mears asked tremulously, one fear replaced by another.

Kirk thought for a moment, "Possibly, Yeoman - possibly not," he said. "Captain Spock will stay as long as he can, of course...but his safety limit must be running very low by now. However, if the ship has gone, we can always land here again."

"Can we, Commander?" McCoy asked. He was looking out of the door, and now stepped backward and touched the control to shut it.

Kirk looked at him curiously.

"We don't have to worry about the lizards," he said, "but I'm not so happy about the bees. Look."

Kirk peered through the port.

Several proto-bees were flying towards the shuttle; more were arriving even as he watched. They were flying quite strongly.

Kirk shook his head. "Almost as if something has attracted them here," he said, his voice puzzled.

"They could have sensed our presence," McCoy suggested. "Smelt our blood or something."

"But why?" Mears asked, her voice shaking.

"We did see one chasing a lizard," Kirk said thoughtfully. "It may be they're parasitic, feeding off other creatures. But what I don't understand - the ones I saw earlier were very clumsy fliers - not like that." He indicated one that was beating persistently against the clear plastic of the forward port.

"Perhaps the clumsy ones were all males," suggested Masters.

All three men stared at her with varying degrees of indignation. "I mean," she said patiently, "that it's usually the female insect that needs to find a host species. Either to paralyse and lay her eggs on to provide food for her young, or to suck blood from - or else her eggs wouldn't be fertile. So the females would need to be good fliers. But the males wouldn't require to be particularly mobile; all they would need would be enough mobility to find a mate - and in fact, if they had enough sex appeal, the females would come to them."

"Yes," Kirk said slowly. "You could be right, Charlene."

She shrugged. "Thank my upbringing in a country with biting insects."

Kirk nodded ruefully. He, himself, should have remembered that. McCoy, too; the truant memory recalled too late to be of value.

The last few minutes dragged interminably. The proto-bees were now clustered all over the shuttle; they knew full well that inside were potential hosts for their eggs, and Kirk realised that if they were forced to return, they would be unable to leave the protection of the shuttle...and would die, their life support exhausted, before the Enterprise could possibly return from Babel for them.

"Ready," Masters said at last. They took their places.

The bridge door slid open. Spock knew without looking round that Ferris had come onto the bridge, and was now standing looking at him with that self-satisfied expression that so infuriated the crew. Indeed, Spock realised, Ferris was undoubtedly the most disliked of all the Ambassadors and Commissioners on the ship - even Petri was preferable, for Petri acted out of the unconscious arrogance of a minor feudal lord while Ferris was known to have risen 'through the ranks' by ruthlessness. That his ruthlessness was coupled with ability had certainly assisted him; it was just a pity that he had not learned to use diplomacy when dealing with his subordinates as well as with his enemies.

"Captain."

Spock forced control onto himself, deliberately subduing his dislike of the man. "Well, Mr. Ferris?"

"Your time is up. It is time for you to leave here and take us on to Babel."

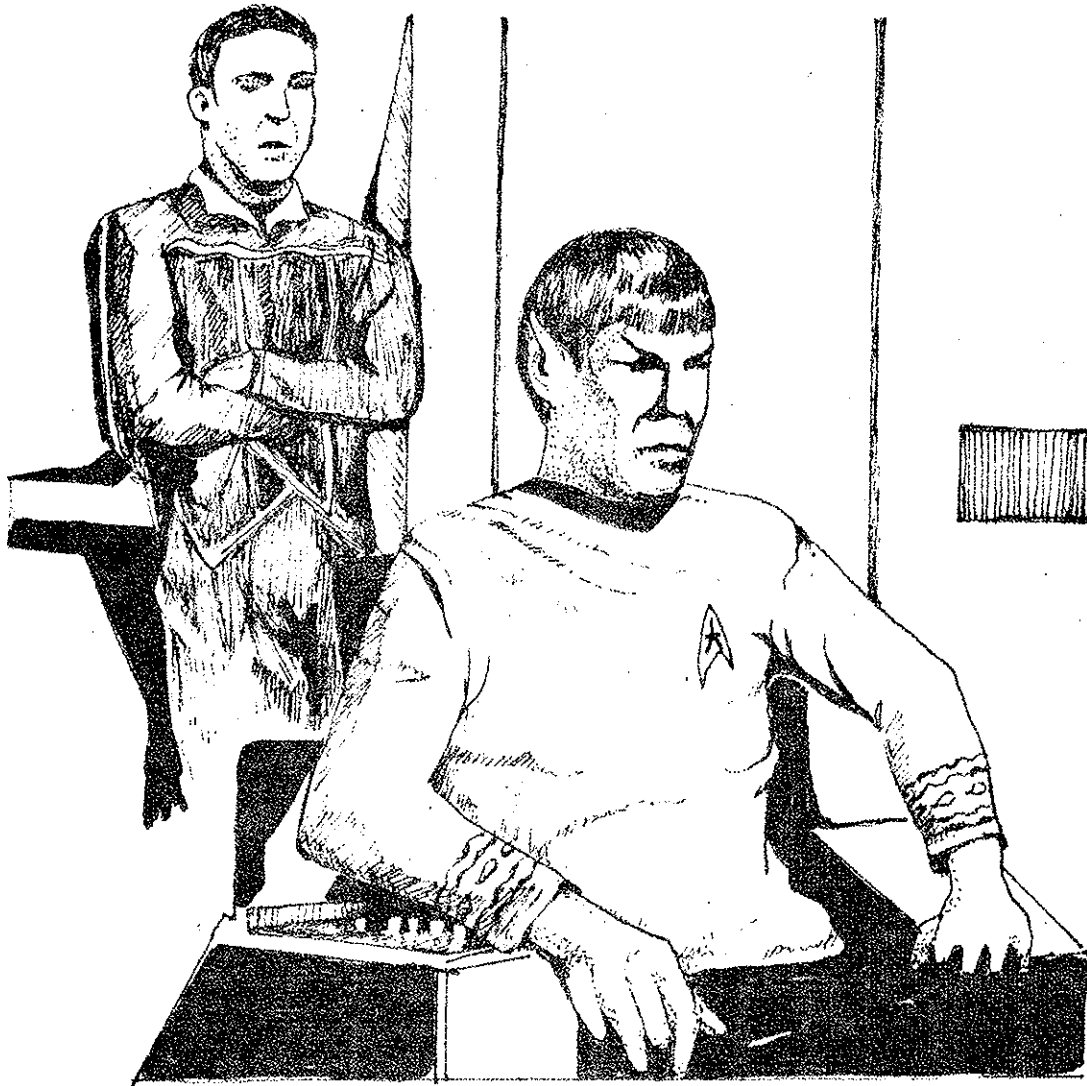
"I have search parties out still - "

"Captain!" Uhura interrupted. "Another landing party reports a casualty... like Immamura, sir - babbling."

"Beam them up first," Spock directed. "And then get everyone else up. Recall the other shuttles. We will return after we deliver the delegates to Babel."

"Yes, sir."

He looked at Ferris. "We will be on our way shortly, sir." His voice was



curt. "I trust you - and your colleagues - will not be too disturbed by a ten minute delay? We do, after all, have twenty four hours in hand still."

The door opened again, and Selek came to join Ferris. "Is there any word?" he asked quietly.

"None, sir," Spock replied equally quietly.

Selek nodded, once. Ferris said suspiciously, "Are you sure it will take no more than ten minutes to recall your crew?"

"I am quite sure that Captain Spock will not delay," Selek said smoothly. "He knows his duty to Starfleet." He threw Spock a sympathetic glance before continuing, "We should leave him to his duty, Commissioner. We are only delaying him by interrupting him."

Ferris grunted, but allowed himself to be ushered out. The suspicion crossed Spock's mind that the Human was somewhat flattered by Selek's attention - though not enough to persuade him to agree to any further delay even should Selek suggest it.

The Captain returned to the intercom. The Captain knows his duty... "Dr. M'Benga, have you taken charge of your new patient yet?"

"Yes, Captain. He's exactly the same as Immamura - muttering incoherently and not seeming to recognise anyone. It's almost as if they were drugged."

"Examine the possibility, Doctor. Mr. Kirk's party might be having the

same trouble."

"Of course, Captain."

Spock stared at the swirling clouds that were all the viewscreen was showing of the planet beneath. Down there...somewhere... And in a few minutes, they would have to leave...leaving Kirk - and McCoy - and Charlene Masters - and some of his crew - to the unknown danger that had robbed two of the searchers of their minds, and possibly killed a third. Damn Ferris! Without him and his petty obstructionism they could have taken a third day, even a fourth, and by travelling faster still reached Babel in time. Selek would certainly have supported Spock should any of the other diplomats have objected. Well, that was an unproductive train of thought to pursue. Ferris was present, and it was a waste of time to wish that he was not.

"All the landing parties have beamed aboard, sir," Uhura reported. "No more casualties. The first shuttle is just coming in to land. The others are about five minutes behind."

"Very well, Miss Uhura. Mr. Sulu - set course for Babel."

"Aye, sir." Obediently, Sulu's fingers began to run over the board.

Was there anything left that he could do? Kirk was surely trying to repair the Galileo, would attempt to lift off if it were at all feasible... Well, another few minutes wouldn't make much difference, and they could easily make up the lost time without Ferris being any the wiser. "Speed - half sub-light. Keep all viewers on the planet until further orders. Sensors, too - as we get further from the heart of the cloud, they might begin giving us some positive readings."

The weight of the bees added tremendously to the strain on the engine, labouring as it was under a barely adequate alternate fuel. Masters admitted later that if Latimer had survived and been with them, his added weight would have prevented them from taking off at all. Slowly...slowly...then gradually faster and faster the shuttle rose, shedding proto-bees in a steady shower as the rarifying air half stunned them and they fell from their limpet-like agglomeration, one by two by three, the weakest first until finally the last handful tucked away in the few corners where something bee-sized could lodge died in the airless void as the Galileo finally achieved orbit.

Kirk reached for the communicator button. "Kirk to Enterprise. Kirk to Enterprise."

Nothing.

Masters' repair, which she said would give short-range contact, had not been sufficient. Their signal was still too weak to reach the Enterprise.

//Spock!!!// He sent the thought as strongly as he could along the bonding link just as Masters said,

"We're losing power, Mr. Kirk. The extra weight as we took off used up too much fuel. We have approximately five minutes left. Shall I descend again, try for a controlled landing?" She glanced sideways. "Mr. Kirk?"

//Spock!!!!!!//

//Jim!// He could only just make out the relieved thought.

//Hurry - we've only got a few minutes.// Now that the link had been made, it was easier, though the touch was still tenuous. "No, Miss Masters." A part of his mind was aware of what she had asked. "Keep us up as long as possible."

"Yes, sir." She looked at him once more, then away.

"You can't!" Boma exclaimed. "We'll burn up if we don't go down now!"

"Would you prefer to be eaten alive by the bee larvae?" Kirk asked quietly.

"Eaten..." Boma fell silent, not questioning Kirk's comment.

"Fuel exhausted," Masters reported. "Orbit beginning to decay. I'll keep as shallow a line of descent as possible, but..."

//Spock - hurry!//

//We're almost there, Jim.// Spock looked at Uhura. "Are we within transporter range yet?"

"Another thirty seconds."

So close. Too close. He could sense his bondmate's knowledge of imminent death, though not what was about to cause it. He clung desperately to Kirk's mind, wishing yet again that they did have a full link.

"Energise as soon as we are within range," he said.

There was a short silence. Then Sulu said quietly, "The shuttle has just burned up, sir."

So that was the danger. Their sensors, though now able to show the Galileo once Spock knew where to look for it, were not yet sensitive enough to give that sort of detail.

He had lost contact with Kirk's mind. And then, like a solar flare, he became aware of it again even as Uhura swung round from her console.

"Transporter room reports five beamed safely aboard, sir. Mr. Kirk is among them."

Kirk leaned back against Spock's legs with a sigh of contentment. Spock echoed it.

"Jim...I was terrified that I'd lost you this time."

"It was close," Kirk admitted. "It would have been wiser, I suppose, to have stayed put on the planet - I knew you'd have to leave soon to take the brass on to Babel - and taken off once I was pretty sure you were back again - but it was too dangerous. We'd have died of suffocation long before you could have got back. Those bees were deadly."

"Yes - I saw that. However, since Dr. McCoy knew what he was looking for, Immamura and Strang have a good chance of complete recovery. What about the lizards?"

"I feel sorry for them. They showed signs of evolving intelligence, but their lives are constantly at risk - what with the bees parasiting on them and I suspect some bigger lizards preying on them. Their telepathic abilities have evolved as a defence, I'd guess. Whether it'll serve them until they can develop a civilisation, I don't know - and frankly, Spock, I don't think I want to go back and find out! I've got quite a lot of material in the tricorders to work on, so Starfleet will get a pretty comprehensive report on that part of the planet at least - but I think I've done my share of exploring the Murasaki Effect."

"So do I," Spock agreed.

"How concerned was Selek - that you couldn't contact me?"

"He was somewhat suspicious - but the fact that you finally did contact me through the bond seems to have satisfied him."

"Thank heaven for that. Well, we shouldn't have any more problems now till we reach Babel."

"Except that the bridge crew must be wondering how I knew where you were, all of a sudden," Spock commented.

"Let them wonder," Kirk said. "It's nothing to do with them."

Spock smiled, then reached for his harp and began to play softly. Kirk settled comfortably, totally content.

SPOCK'S LOG

So we have survived another danger.

I must admit to having experienced considerable concern during the last two days. Not only was I unsure of Jim's condition, I found Ferris's attitude a constant distraction. He seems to dislike me - and possibly Jim as well - and I cannot understand why, for we have no indication that Ferris ever met the Captain, and Jim certainly never met the Commissioner before now. Perhaps it is merely one of those inexplicable dislikes that Humans sometimes experience.

Selek could also have been a problem to me during this time; however, I think I was able to convince him that it was only the unusual magnetic effects prevailing in the area that prevented my contacting Jim through the bondmate link, especially since in the end it was the link that drew me to him. However, I think we will have to be cautious in our dealings with Selek for a while.

A full bonding link...it draws me more than I would have considered possible, in the old days when my telepathic abilities were only barely awakened. But I cannot - will not - try to persuade Jim to commit himself to me so fully. I could easily persuade him, I know; he offered it even before he knew exactly what it meant, and we have become even closer since then. But he still depends on my strength more often than I think he is aware of...just as I find myself depending on his strength more often than he realises. And I think that if we were to bond fully now, he would always depend on me to some extent - and I want our final bonding, if indeed we can ever have one, to be a true meeting of equals.

Jim seems to have done well on Taurus II; even though two men died, he brought the others safely home, in spite of their fears. He had nobody but himself to lean on, since only he was unaffected by the irrational fear that affected everyone else, and he did so successfully. It is a good sign.

Now to get the various diplomats safely to Babel. Last time things nearly went wrong...I can only hope that the differences this time are such that the trip will go smoothly.

THE JOURNEY

Kirk whistled softly as he strode along the corridor. Murasaki 312 was already twenty-four hours behind them; Babel, still a week ahead. He had a considerable amount of information on Taurus II to research, which meant that he would have plenty to do on this milk run. The thought that he would be able to avoid encountering most of the diplomats - except Selek, of course - was cheering.

He rounded a corner to find a known figure approaching.

"Good afternoon, Ambassador Petri." Little though he liked the man, downright rudeness was not Kirk's way.

The Troyian Ambassador marched past without deigning even to look in Kirk's direction. The Human smiled ruefully, shrugged unconcernedly, and continued on his way.

Further along the corridor, Petri fell into step with Ferris, who, it seemed, might almost have been waiting for him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Petri," Ferris said.

Petri grunted what might have been an answer. Ferris continued, apparently unperturbed.

"Have you thought any further about the proposal I made to you?"

Petri scowled. "I do not like the idea," he growled. "It seems to me that you would expect me to run all the risks in the endeavour, so that you can benefit."

"Not at all, Mr. Petri," Ferris hastened to assure him. "Granted, you would be running some risk - I would simply be backing you - but wouldn't it be worth it, to regain honour in the eyes of your own people?"

Petri's scowl deepened. He had no idea of how Ferris had found out about his recent disgrace (in fact he had heard two crewmen talking, added that to the information given him by Spock, and come up with a reasonably accurate conclusion). That Ferris should use the information to - in effect - blackmail him was doubly galling.

He hated Kirk, and Spock only fractionally less so; but at least he could respect them. Ferris he did not even respect; for Ferris was trying to coerce him into something that he could not see would necessarily advantage him by much. Granted, it would be sweet to be revenged on the two men he held primarily responsible for his own humiliation - but he could not even guarantee obtaining his revenge, and it was always perfectly possible that he might be held to have dishonoured his own name even more.

"Why do you hate the Human so much?" he asked, more to give himself additional time to think than because of any real curiosity.

"Not the Human - the Vulcan," Ferris replied coldly. "I have a score to settle with him; and the best way to settle it would seem to be through the Human."

"It is not the Troyian way," Petri said. "If we have a quarrel with anyone, we challenge that one; we do not seek to involve anyone else in our dispute. I am not willing to do this."

"You cannot refuse," Ferris told him. "If you do, I will spread it about that you are seeking to murder Kirk. We have been seen together more than once; you are known to have supported me in my attempts to get the Enterprise on its way to Babel without wasting time at that gaseous cloud. If I could only have forced the Vulcan to leave sooner..." He glared at the Troyian. "It is widely supposed that we are friends. If I tell one or two people - in confidence - that you wish to see Kirk dead, I will be believed - especially since I can also tell them why..."

Petri glowered, considering the threat. Ferris was right - it might very well be believed. He cursed his stupidity in allowing himself to be gulled by Ferris's apparent friendship. Why had he allowed his normal distrust of outworlders to be overruled? Nobody would believe such a story of a Troyian under normal circumstances; but he had already been caught out cheating. Such a lie might well be believed of him.

He had no choice. "Very well," he said ungraciously. "You give me no choice. But be warned; what you do dishonours me even more. I will have blood for it."

Ferris smiled his satisfied smile. "I do not think so, Mr. Petri. You see, I am always very careful...you will be given no opportunity to challenge me to a duel - publicly. And in private, my honour does not demand that I accede to such a challenge, and I would refuse it. Nobody on Earth would think the less of a sedentary diplomat for refusing to fight a duel with weapons he has never used...though I will concede that a challenge given in public could be harder to refuse."

Petri's scowl deepened even more. "When do you want me to act?" he asked ungraciously.

"There is no hurry. Choose your own time. We do, after all, have a week."

Kirk was just outside the lab door when the intercom bleeped. "Bridge to Commander Kirk."

With a resigned sigh -- whatever it was had to be important for Spock to call him from the research he had himself authorised -- Kirk crossed to the nearest intercom. "Kirk here."

"We're picking up some very confused signals, Commander," Spock said quietly. "I need my Science Officer on the bridge."

"On my way." If Spock needed him, everything else could, without hesitation, take second place.

He strode onto the bridge and went straight to Spock. "What's the problem?"

Spock gave a half shrug. "Miss Uhura had picked up some signals. Nothing particularly identifiable. But..." He hesitated. "Jim -- " his voice was very quiet " -- something like this happened in the other universe. We had an Orion spy on board, disguised as an Andorian, and he tried to destroy the ship. The signals came from his contact ship."

Kirk shot him a sharp look. "We have no Andorians aboard." Even as he spoke he knew he was being unnecessarily literal in his response.

Spock, however, nodded. "Events cannot, in any case, be wholly duplicated. The last time, my father was the Vulcan Ambassador on board...under suspicion of murdering the Tellarite Ambassador."

The Human almost whistled. "Maybe it's as well there are no Tellarites either."

"No. But there are other Ambassadors..."

Kirk chewed his lip meditatively. "Who did murder the Tellarite?"

"The Orion spy, of course."

"Of course." He sighed. "You think we should assume some sort of duplication of events?"

Spock hesitated. "Jim, I don't know. Nothing else has ever -- quite -- duplicated itself. The fact that I know of some...parallels...in itself can provide differences. I can make an educated estimate of what courses of action to avoid." He hesitated again. "One thing -- Jim, be careful. The other time...the other time, Jim Kirk was stabbed. By the spy. He very nearly died."

Kirk nodded his acceptance of the warning. "I'll be careful." They exchanged an affectionate look, then Kirk went to his station and bent over his viewer.

He adjusted it carefully, noting the discrepant readings. After a moment, he raised his head.

"A small ship, sir," he announced. "It's at extreme range for the sensors and well outside phaser range. Size indicates a scout vessel of some kind, but the configuration is unfamiliar." He looked over at Spock, reaching for their link. //It doesn't fit any of the Orion designs recorded in the computer.//

//We don't have a record of all Orion ship designs,// Spock reminded him.

//I know. All I say is, it doesn't match anything we have a record of.// Aloud, he went on, "I don't think much of their helm and navigation -- they're at extreme range, but they're not holding a constant distance -- it's fluctuating considerably."

"Perhaps they're just having difficulty in matching our speed exactly," Spock remarked.

Her attention still fixed on her console, Uhura cut in. "Starfleet

confirms no other authorised vessels in this sector, Captain."

Which means it's probably hostile and we knew that already, Spock thought. "Try hailing her."

"I've tried all frequencies and tied in the universal translator," Uhura replied. "They don't answer."

"Continue sending friendship messages on automatic," Spock ordered.

"Yes, sir."

It could be chance, Spock thought. Perhaps I'm being over-cautious as a result of what happened in the other universe. But if it's a ship innocently in the area, why does it not respond to contact?

"Increase speed to warp four," he ordered.

"Warp four, sir," Sulu confirmed.

After a minute, Kirk looked round again. "He's definitely following us," he said grimly. "We lost him for a moment, when we first put on speed; now he's caught up again and he's hanging on there, sticking just at the edge of sensor contact."

He and Spock exchanged a long look. Then Spock thumbed his intercom. "Security," he said evenly. "The ship is being tailed by an intruder. I want a twenty-four hour guard on all ambassadorial personnel and a class two security patrol of all corridors until further notice."

"Yes, sir." The Security Chief's voice sounded slightly resigned, and Spock's eyebrow lifted, while he made a mental note to get the Chief replaced as soon as possible. This man clearly thought his Captain was being unnecessarily paranoid about the safety of the visiting diplomats. And while Spock knew he could never explain just why he was being so paranoid, he was not pleased that the man should make it so obvious that he barely agreed with the necessity.

//You can't really blame him,// came to him through the link.

//I know. But a competent Security Chief would accept that such a guard, while perhaps not necessary, was certainly a reassuring precaution for the diplomats. No matter how hard we try to keep it quiet, knowledge of the pursuing ship will certainly reach their ears.//

The next hour passed relatively quietly. Kirk occupied himself by discovering all he could about their shadow, which was very little; Spock thought over past events, trying to think of anything that would help them in their present dilemma, to no avail.

"I'm picking up another signal, sir," Uhura said after a while.

"Give it to Mr. Kirk for possible decoding," Spock directed.

"Aye, sir.... Sir, the directional locator indicates the reception point as somewhere inside this ship."

"That was...almost to be expected, Miss Uhura."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk looked up. "It's indecipherable, Captain."

Spock nodded. "It's in no known code." The same as last time.

"Yes, sir. There is no detectable pattern to help us. If we even knew the original language..." //I've tried Orion,// he added over the link. //No result.//

"Could it belong to any of the subject races of the Klingon Empire?" Spock asked.

Kirk shook his head. "The computer is programmed for those too, sir. Nothing. The only conclusion I can come to is that it's completely alien; from no race we have as yet encountered."

Spock's lips tightened. "Miss Uhura," he said quietly, "if that ship starts broadcasting again, I want to know who on board the Enterprise is receiving the signal."

"Yes, sir."

More time passed. Uhura, Sulu, Chekov and most of the monitoring personnel from the various departments were relieved and went off duty; only Captain and First Officer remained in their places. Finally Spock glanced over at his second-in-command, noting the whitening face, the weariness in his half-slumped position. He knew Kirk wanted to remain on duty with him, but now he felt that his subordinate should rest. He said so.

"I'm all right, Captain," Kirk protested.

"Mr. Kirk, you will be of more use to me rested. Go off duty. Mr. Leslie, take over Mr. Kirk's station!"

"Aye, sir." Leslie moved from navigation to the science station. Kirk heaved himself wearily to his feet.

"Yes, sir," he said. He crossed to the turbolift, went in. "Deck Five."

He had to force himself to walk out of the turbolift and along the corridor towards his cabin. He was so much tired than he'd realised...

A faint noise behind him made him turn, but slowly, expecting it to be a security guard. Someone jumped onto him. He struggled fiercely, realising that they must indeed have a spy on board. Who?

...'Jim Kirk was stabbed by the spy. He nearly died'...

No! He must avoid that, at all costs. He couldn't, wouldn't, put Spock through the agony of seeing Jim Kirk stabbed again...

A sharp pain in his back made him gasp even as he realised that he had failed to avoid injury. He struggled once more to grapple with his assailant, pain stabbed afresh at his back, knifing through him, and he collapsed, not quite unconscious but incapable of coherent thought.

//Jim!//

Spock held himself consciously relaxed as pain slid between his ribs, knowing that it was his bondmate's pain he felt. //Jim! Where are you?//

There was no reply. A wave of faintness threatened to overcome him for a moment, and he drew a deep breath, fighting it. The bond had, of itself, become deeper than he had thought if he was experiencing Jim's pain and weakness this strongly. He fought for control, finally managing to push both the weakness and his fear for Kirk to the back of his mind where they lay, a nagging worry but one which would not prevent his working efficiently. He punched the intercom button on his chair.

"Spock to security. I have reason to believe that some misfortune has overtaken Commander Kirk. I want a phase two search instituted for him immediately."

He switched off, aware that the bridge crew was staring at him in some surprise, knowing that he had added fuel to the speculation already existing, and that even those crew members who had not already heard of his unusual awareness of Kirk's position as they left Taurus II had had their attention drawn to the bond between their senior officers; and that the diplomats, too, would be wondering. Well, let them wonder, as Jim had said. The only one who mattered was Selek, and he understood.

In the corridor, a man stared down at the barely-conscious First Officer and choked back a curse. Now there would not be time to finish his work... the alarm was already raised. But time would do it for him. Bending, he scooped Kirk into his arms, and hurried into the nearest turbolift. There, he realised that the blood dripping from the deep wound would leave a trail that would betray where he planned to hide Kirk to any searchers. Hastily he made a rough pad to staunch the bleeding, tearing the Human's shirt for material to make it.

The turbolift halted at the lowest storage levels of the ship. The man looked guiltily around even though he knew he would see nobody, and then carried Kirk quickly past several doors before finally pausing before one of them. It opened; the man entered.

This store of little-needed engineering spares would be the ideal place to leave the Human. It was cold here, in this part of the ship where heating, other than the barest minimum necessary to keep everything from freezing solid, would be a waste of power. Between them, the cold and the deep wound would be enough to kill the Human relatively quickly.

He put Kirk down ungently in the corner furthest from the door, and quickly moved several boxes so that the corner would be hidden from anything but the closest inspection, guessing that any search of this area would be at best superficial. Then he left hastily.

Alone, Kirk tried to pull himself upright; the effort was too much for him, and he slumped to the ground, this time fully unconscious.

On the bridge, Spock's awareness of his bondmate abruptly ceased, leaving him slightly disorientated, knowing only that Kirk was still alive. For the moment.

Selek and McCoy arrived together, and Spock suppressed an unVulcan sigh of near despair at sight of them. No - at sight of Selek. McCoy, who knew the truth, could be confided in.

"What's happened?" McCoy asked, speaking just as the older Vulcan opened his mouth.

"Something has happened to Jim." In this moment of frightening anxiety, Spock forgot that his bondmate was always referred to as 'James' in front of other Vulcans - the Captain had not been a man to use affectionate diminutives.

"What?" Selek asked sharply.

Spock shook his head. "I am not entirely sure," he replied dully. "He has been injured - it felt like a knife-wound in the back - and lost consciousness almost immediately. I do not know where he is."

"Not another duel?" McCoy asked sharply.

"No. A surprise attack."

The door opened again and the Security Chief entered the bridge. He looked rather shaken, and it was obvious that he was unlikely ever to question - or doubt - Spock's orders again. However, Spock was still determined to have him transferred. He crossed to Spock.

"We found this snagged on a protruding pipe close to Commander Kirk's quarters," he said, holding out a piece of cloth. "There was blood on the floor nearby."

Spock took it, looked at it. McCoy's eyes were fixed on it. "That looks like something off Ambassador Petri's cloak," he said slowly. He and Spock exchanged glances. Was it possible that Petri, hating Kirk as they knew he did, had seized this opportunity to be revenged for his disgrace?

"I will speak to Ambassador Petri," Spock decided.

He found Petri in his room, restlessly pacing. The Troyian looked round as he entered, two guards at his heels.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"Somebody has just attacked Commander Kirk," Spock replied, and nobody could have mistaken the menace in his voice. "Ambassador, where were you during the past hour?"

"You suspect me?" The Troyian's voice sounded genuinely indignant, Spock decided.

"This was found near the scene of the attack." Spock held out the scrap of cloth.

Petri drew a deep breath. "It is possible. I tore my cloak yesterday as I walked along the corridor."

"In that case, you cannot object to telling me where you were an hour ago."

"I was here, in my cabin," Petri growled. "Captain, a Troyian does not attack - anyone - without due warning and in front of witnesses. I have no reason to love your Commander Kirk, but I would not murder him. I know who might, though."

"Who?"

"Commissioner Ferris. He has been trying to persuade me to accuse Kirk of theft, having first hidden something of mine in his quarters."

"Why?"

Intent on saving himself, Petri had no hesitation in betraying his would-be partner. "He hates you, Captain. He thinks to harm you by injuring Kirk."

Spock's eyebrow lifted. Was this indeed simply coincidence, then, with the attack on Kirk unlinked to the alien ship shadowing them so closely?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. "Thank you, sir. I will speak to Mr. Ferris. Meanwhile, I must ask you, for your own safety, not to leave this cabin. Until we discover for certain who attacked Commander Kirk, and why, we must assume that everyone is in danger."

"Yes. Yes, I will stay here." Petri watched Spock and his security men leave, then resumed his restless pacing, half a dozen strides each way. Whatever he did, Ferris was surely being responsible for his losing what honour he had left...

Ambassador Selek joined Spock as he went along the corridor from Petri's cabin.

"Well, nephew?"

"We had what seemed good reason to suspect Ambassador Petri," he said grimly. "Petri, in turn, accuses Commissioner Ferris. I am on my way to see Ferris now."

"Ferris? But why?"

"According to Petri, Ferris hates me, and wishes to harm me through James. I have no memory of meeting the man before this, although it is, I suppose, possible that I have done so." Or that the Captain did, entered his mind unbidden. If that was so... If that was so, what had passed between them?

"I see. If I may help you in any way, you have only to ask."

"Thank you, sir. For the moment, however, I think it best if I see Ferris alone."

"Of course." A witness to the exchange might make matters worse, whereas a one-to-one confrontation could clear the air of whatever was causing Ferris's hatred.

Spock paused at the Ambassador's door; Selek nodded, and walked away. Spock glanced at the accompanying security guards. "I will see Mr. Ferris alone," he repeated. "But remain here, on guard. If there is any outcry, if he tries to leave the cabin alone, stun him and hold him in the brig."

"Yes, sir."

Spock pressed the buzzer.

"Come."

He opened the door and went in.

Ferris looked up as he entered, a startled expression that barely masked his hatred on his face.

"Mr. Ferris," Spock said quietly.

"What do you want?"

"Mr. Ferris, where have you been during the past hour?"

"What's that to you, you...bastard?"

Spock felt an eyebrow lift. "I do not see that insulting me will accomplish anything, Mr. Ferris," he said quietly. "I asked you a question; if you do not answer, my security chief will also be asking that same question. I think you will find the brig less comfortable than this cabin."

"I was here, in my cabin."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Very convenient," Spock commented. "No witnesses...your word only." Ferris shot him a glance of pure hatred. "Mr. Ferris, I am curious; why do you hate me so much that you would see someone else, who never harmed you, killed, in order to injure me?"

Ferris glared at him. "Why? Did it mean so little to you that you cannot remember? But I remember; I will never forget." He spat. "I suppose Petri talked. Loose-mouthed fool; I offered him a chance to see the man who lost him his honour disgraced. It would have redeemed his precious honour. But it seems that he is the coward he was called."

"The impression I received was that he felt you were making him the victim of your wish to see me injured," Spock replied with apparent placidity. "Or was that just an excuse? A cover for your real aim - to betray the Federation."

"Betray... So. Having destroyed my son, you wish now to destroy me?"

'Destroyed my son...' What had the Captain done?

Spock knew he must be careful. Ferris obviously expected him to recall whatever it was that he was talking about with that reference. "I was not aware that my actions would destroy anyone."

"No? How did you expect him to react after you raped him, you perverted - "

Raped him. Given the Captain's sexual preferences, it was not completely surprising. Spock barely heard the abuse Ferris poured out as he considered this new item of information.

"I take it you have proof of this so-called assault?" Spock realised that



his best defence was a sharp attack.

"My son's word," Ferris said harshly. "He left me a written statement of what had happened before he killed himself. I could have published it - but I decided to wait, wait my opportunity, and instead of simply disgracing you, find some other way to be avenged."

Spock's lips tightened. This must have happened, he realised, before the Captain knew Kirk, or Kirk would have been able to warn him about it when Ferris came on board. "All that was a long time ago," he hazarded.

"Almost fifteen years," Ferris agreed. "And for every day of that time, I have dreamed of meeting you - and punishing you. I thought my chance had come at Muraskai 312, but that interfering fool Selek butted in. But I won't forget. One day..."

Spock looked at him thoughtfully. One day... So. He obviously didn't know that Jim had been attacked today; that he was missing now.

"Mr. Ferris - will you accept my word that I never had any thought of harming your son - or anyone?"

Ferris glared at him in open disbelief. "You can say that? You rape someone and claim you never meant to harm him?"

There was one defence Spock knew he might offer - that there was considerable difference between rape and seduction. But he knew he could not offer it. If the accusation was true, the Captain had done irreparable harm indeed to Ferris's son; he could not compound it by putting into Ferris's mind doubts

about his son's veracity. Especially since it was perfectly possible that the story was true.

Yet he must do something to defend himself - and Jim - from Ferris's hatred. "How many people know of this?" he asked.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Ferris asked scornfully. "Nobody knows the details but me. Do you think I would publicise my son's shame? As far as everyone else knows, he died in an accident. Only I know, because of the message he left me, that he deliberately crashed his aircar. Oh, a lot of people know I hate you. But nobody knows why."

"Hasn't it entered your head that my simplest defence, now that I know your plans, would be to kill you myself?" Spock asked.

Ferris stared at him, obviously taken aback.

"No, I see that it did not," Spock went on.

"You wouldn't...you couldn't!" Ferris gasped.

"No? That comment shows a belief in my integrity that doesn't match your belief that I raped your son."

"Are you saying he was lying?" Ferris was angry again.

"I say merely that I have never raped anyone," Spock replied quietly. "Perhaps he was assaulted by someone else - and accused me, for some reason best known to himself." He did not expect Ferris to believe that.

"Never!" Ferris snapped.

Spock nodded. "It does seem unlikely," he agreed. He moved closer to the Commissioner. Ferris backed away; Spock followed him until the Human was trapped in a corner, unable to retreat any further.

Spock reached out.

"What are you doing?" Ferris gasped.

"Making sure you will not do anything in future to harm me - or Commander Kirk," Spock said evenly. His fingers found the contact points on Ferris's face. "You do not know who raped your son," he said quietly. "You have no positive reason to hate me, only an inexplicable dislike of me. But you do not wish to harm me or anyone close to me. You only wish to avoid me in future."

He stepped back to the door. Ferris looked over at him.

"What do you want, Captain?" His voice, while not exactly welcoming, was not too unfriendly.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir. Could you tell me where you have been for the past hour?"

"Been? Why, here, in my cabin. I have work to do, papers to study for our coming conference on Babel."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, sir. We would be grateful if you remained here for the time being. Someone has just tried to kill Commander Kirk, and we don't know who might be his attacker's next target."

Ferris looked startled. "Is Commander Kirk badly hurt?"

"We don't know yet."

Ferris watched Spock leave. There seemed an odd discrepancy in his memories. He had always disliked the man, even before he met him, and he wasn't sure why; now that he had met him, he was even less sure of why. Captain Spock seemed perfectly likeable...

Kirk swam up through a mist of dizziness into consciousness. Dimly, he was aware of someone moving around, and tried to raise his head, to push himself up. He must get help; he could not die and leave Spock alone again. The effort was too much for him; even as the footsteps moved towards the door, Kirk fell back, unconscious once more.

In his cabin, Spock was momentarily aware of Kirk's pain, and realised that his bondmate had regained consciousness only briefly. If only he had come to his senses long enough to let Spock find him...the link was strong enough, he knew it was...

The intercom bleeped. "Bridge to Captain."

Spock punched into activity. "Spock here."

"The intruder is coming closer, sir."

"I'll be straight up." He closed the circuit, his lips tight. At least McCoy would not be in the middle of a delicate operation when the attack began...but what of Kirk, lying unconscious somewhere, unprotected from any buffeting he might receive...

Selek was in the corridor as he left his cabin, and he controlled his annoyance with an effort. His 'uncle' fell into step beside him. "What did you learn from Mr. Ferris?"

"Nothing of value. It was not he who attacked James, that is certain."

"And now? You look doubly concerned, nephew." He looked searchingly at Spock. "Is there anything I can do to assist you?"

They had reached the elevator. Spock said quietly, "You would help me very much, sir, if you were to remain in your cabin for the moment. Whoever tried to kill James is still at large, and we no longer have any idea of who it might be; and there is an alien ship tailing us."

"And your Science Officer is not available."

"That is true. But I have a good crew; Mr. Chekov is competent to take his place."

"Will Mr. Chekov not be required at his own station?"

Spock suppressed a sigh. "His second is due for promotion; and can take the post perfectly well. My main concern is James. Should he die, I do not think I could operate coherently..."

"I have some training, Spock; I can substitute for James." He was watching the younger Vulcan intently, or so it seemed to the wary Captain. And indeed he was, for the very reason that Spock had just given. If his bondmate died, Spock would not be able to remain on duty.

Spock struggled for a logical reason why Selek should not come to the bridge, and failed to find one. "Thank you, sir. Your offer is most welcome."

They entered the bridge together, and moved to their respective stations. Spock caught Chekov's half-resentful glance at Selek, and knew that the young Human felt slighted. It wouldn't affect his performance - he was too experienced for him to allow it to affect his performance - but Spock knew that he was going to have some fast talking to do afterwards, if Chekov's morale was not to suffer.

"Report," Spock ordered. Reports came in from round the bridge; status normal; the intruder, although much closer, was holding its distance again.

Uhura broke in. "I'm picking up another signal, Captain - from inside

the Enterprise."

"Origin?"

"Deck Five. The area assigned to the Vulcan delegation, sir."

"What?" Selek strode to the bridge door. "I'll find out who it is and come straight back, Captain."

"Wait - " Spock began to say that it was not necessary for Selek to return, but his uncle was already gone. Chekov moved to the science station without waiting to be told.

"The intruder is coming closer," he reported almost immediately.

"Deflectors on full," Spock ordered.

"Deflectors on full, sir," Sulu acknowledged.

"Phasers stand by."

"Phasers ready, sir."

"Intruder approaching...warp eight," Chekov reported.

Spock gathered all his wits about him. He was on his own now; at this time, in the other universe, he had been unconscious while McCoy operated on his father's defective heart. He had only the sketchiest knowledge of what that Kirk had done. "Fire as he passes," he ordered.

"Aye, sir... Clean miss, sir," Chekov's replacement Martinez reported. He sounded almost unnecessarily gloomy about it.

Spock was not surprised. A hit, with the target moving at warp eight, would have been the wildest stroke of luck.

"Their weaponry?" Their shooting also had been wildly inaccurate, possibly due to their speed, and had come nowhere close to hitting the Enterprise.

"Standard phasers," Chekov reported.

Spock relaxed slightly. Their deflectors could stand up to standard phasers for hours - short of several direct hits in exactly the same spot in rapid succession, which would weaken the shield concerned. The enemy might become careless if their only advantage was their greater speed.

"Coming round again," Chekov said.

This time the Enterprise shook to a glancing hit. Chekov fell back in his seat, and pain showed briefly in his face. He flexed the arm that had impacted on the chair, and decided that other than a bruise, no harm had been done.

"Arm photon torpedoes," Spock ordered.

"Coming round again," Chekov said again.

"Fire photon torpedoes - widest possible spread."

"Photon torpedoes missed, sir," Martinez reported.

Spock forced himself to remain calm. Kirk, in the other universe, had not failed; this enemy could be defeated. But what had that Kirk done?

The bridge door opened, and Selek returned, leading a rather dejected-looking Vulcan whom Spock recognised as Sher'la, a secretary who was usually assigned to work with Sendak. Sher'la seemed cowed, even frightened; his face paled as the ship shook to a direct phaser hit.

Memory suddenly connected, inspired by something unidentified. Bluff! That had been one of Jim Kirk's main weapons! "Engineering - I want the appearance of a power fluctuation, gradually weakening as if we're losing all our power."

"Aye, sir."

Spock looked back at Sher'la. "Your friends out there will have to destroy this ship to win, you know."

"No," whispered Sher'la. "They swore they would only disable her..."

"Who are they?" Spock went on coldly. "Orions?"

"How did you know?" Sher'la gasped.

"They're holding position just out of phaser range," Chekov reported. "They seem to be looking us over."

Spock nodded, his attention still on Sher'la. "Are you really Vulcan?" he demanded. "Or are you a spy, surgically altered to pass as Vulcan? And - where is my Science Officer?"

Selek said grimly, "There is one sure way to find out." He reached out to Sher'la's face. When the secretary tried to back away, Selek caught him by one arm, holding him effortlessly. A disgusted expression crossed his face. "Your family is disgraced, traitor. Spock, James is - "

"We're beginning to drift, Captain," Sulu cut in. "Shall I correct it?"

"No. Let her drift. Stand by on phasers."

"Aye, sir."

"Intruder approaching...sublight speed, sir," Chekov said.

Spock nodded. They would only get one chance. "Stand by, Mr. Sulu..."

"Intruder now fifty thousand kilometers and closing," Chekov announced. "Forty thousand...thirty thousand..."

"Fire phasers."

There was a moment of silence as the blue light of the phasers lit the viewscreen; then -

"Got him!" Chekov exclaimed. The alien hung motionless for a moment; then with a blinding flash, it blew up.

Spock allowed himself to relax completely, leaning back tiredly, for a moment. Then he straightened.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Uncle, if you will bring Sher'la, I would appreciate the information on where James is - and on Sher'la's own motives."

"James is in a storeroom on the lowest levels," Selek replied evenly. Spock paused at the intercom they were just passing.

"Spock to sickbay - Dr. McCoy, join me at the lowest storage level." Without waiting for a reply he turned to the errant Vulcan. "I would advise you to lead me to my bondmate without any further delay," he said coldly. Sher'la looked at him, swallowed nervously, and headed for the turbolift.

Kirk was lying in a small pool of congealing blood, his skin icy cold.

McCoy ran a scanner quickly over him, his face mirroring his thoughts. He looked up at last. "It's pretty serious, Spock - he's lost a lot of blood, and he's also suffering from exposure. However, the cold slowed down the bleeding, so it's not quite as bad as it might have been. But the faster I can get him to sickbay, the better." He rose and turned towards the intercom. Spock stopped him.

"I'll carry him," he said quietly, and bent to scoop Kirk into his arms. Hauling Sher'la with him, Selek stood back to let him pass, McCoy at his heels, then followed them.

Selek kept a wary eye on his ex-secretary as they rode back to the upper levels in the turbolift, but the fight seemed to have left the venal Vulcan.

As the doors opened, Selek said, "I will wait for you in my quarters, Spock - and I will keep this braka'va safe for you."

At any other time, Spock would have been slightly shocked by the term his uncle used; as it was, the gutter language barely penetrated. He merely nodded as he turned towards sickbay, McCoy hurrying to reach his instruments before Spock demanded an immediate report on Kirk's exact condition.

The Vulcan stood back reluctantly, knowing that he had to leave space for McCoy to work in, desperate to touch his bondmate, to know by touching him how he was. Finally McCoy straightened.

"It's pretty bad," he repeated. "But it could be a lot worse. The left lung has been punctured - but an inch lower and it would have gone through the heart. He was left lying in such a way that the blood flowed out of the wound rather than gathering inside his lung, fortunately."

Spock shivered. "That injury...also happened last time," he said quietly, his voice shaking.

McCoy paused long enough to stare at him. "This happened...in the other universe?" He remembered, even then, to keep his voice lowered; Nurse Tamura, tidying away equipment at the other side of the room, was keeping some of her attention on them, alert in case she should be needed, and she must not hear.

"Something similar. The circumstances were not identical - for one thing, the attacker left...him...lying and he was able to call for help immediately. The attacker was a spy, disguised as an Andorian. This time... I would not have believed a Vulcan capable of such treachery."

McCoy looked shrewdly at him, guessing that at least part of Spock's shock was reaction to the discovery that a Vulcan had attacked his bondmate - a Vulcan, moreover, who knew about the bonding. "What was that Selek called him?" he asked as he turned his attention back to Kirk.

"Called him?" It was an effort to recall Selek's words. "Oh - that. It means one who cannot be trusted; one who would betray his own parents for gain. It is a word not used in polite society," he added. "For my uncle to use it, he must be angry indeed."

Kirk moaned softly, and both men bent over him.

"Jim!" Spock lifted one limp hand.

Kirk's eyes flickered open, and he smiled. "Spock," he whispered. He tried to sit up, and found Spock's hand on one shoulder, McCoy's on the other, pushing him back.

"Just you lie still," McCoy warned him. "You're a long way from being recovered, even if you have come to your senses. Behave yourself, and I'll let you back to your cabin tomorrow, though you'll only be on light duty for several days. Try to do too much, and I'll keep you in here, strapped down if necessary, until you're passed fully fit. Now which is it to be?"

Kirk made a face. "I'll behave," he said.

Spock tightened his grip on the hand he still held. "There's nothing for you to worry about, Jim," he said. "We know who attacked you, though we don't know why - yet - and we've disposed of the intruder. He decided to attack us but he didn't have much imagination. So now we're on the straightforward trip to Babel that this should have been...and we have plenty time for you to relax and recover fully.

Kirk smiled up at him. //Spock - I'm sorry.//

//It wasn't your fault, t'hy'la.//

//You warned me...//

//True, but even so, I did not suspect...// "I must go now and discover why Sher'la tried to kill you," he said, knowing that Kirk, left to himself, would quickly fall into a healing sleep.

"Sher'la?" Kirk asked, startled. "But..."

"Yes. This is not the Vulcan way. The man may be insane, of course... or he may simply be one of the few who are without honour."

"Spock - "

"Yes, Jim?"

//Be just...// Kirk knew the anger of a Vulcan whose bondmate was insulted; he could guess at the anger, deeply controlled though it was, of a Vulcan whose bondmate had been deliberately and callously attacked, seriously injured, left to die, and it frightened him to think of the normally gentle Spock in the grip of that anger.

//I will try.//

McCoy saw only the exchange of looks. He could guess at a silent message exchanged, and his guess was confirmed when Spock said, "Sleep now, Jim. I will be back soon," even although Kirk did not appear to have answered his question.

Spock put Kirk's hand down gently, and straightened. He looked at McCoy. "If you want me - if he wants me - I will be either in Selek's cabin or my own."

He decided that it would be best to confront Sher'la in his own cabin, and once there he contacted Selek. His uncle arrived within minutes, two aides with him, escorting Sher'la. The aides waited outside the door as Selek took his prisoner inside.

Spock, sitting at his desk, motioned Selek into the seat on the opposite side of the desk. Selek sat, his attention fixed on his prisoner, who stood uneasily, his gaze fixed on the floor.

"You were in contact with the alien vessel," Spock said coldly. "Why?"

Sher'la glanced at him, then dropped his eyes again.

"You are aware of your shame, it seems. Secondly, and more importantly; was it you who attacked Commander Kirk?" There was no doubt, but he wanted the confession.

Sher'la glanced at him and nodded.

"Why?"

When Sher'la failed to answer, Spock repeated the question, his voice even colder. "I will have an answer. Why?" The quiet voice sent a shiver down Sher'la's spine.

"I can tell you," Selek said, disgust in his voice. "I read it in his mind. He hoped to curry favour with Sendak, whom he knew dislikes James."

"I have long known that Sendak does not like either James or me, but I did not think he would stoop to murder - especially murder committed by someone else."

"Indeed, if I thought he would, I would disown him," Selek growled. "No - this appears to have been Sher'la's idea solely."

"Injure James - perhaps even kill him - and through him, injure me," Spock said slowly. "Leaving Sendak heir in our place. Yes - the deed once done, he might have been grateful to the man who accomplished it, though I cannot think him so base. And the Orions?" He glared at Sher'la.

The man still refused to meet his eyes. Selek answered for him once more. "Greed. They promised him payment to disrupt the Babel conference. He had been selling secrets to them for some time - fortunately, he was never in a

position to know anything of major importance. But he does appear not to have known that they intended to destroy this ship, and with it their agent - him. Possibly he was becoming an embarrassment to them; he could, after all, have changed sides again if he felt it would pay him better, and he was then certainly in a position to accuse them of trying to disrupt the Federation."

"I would not have thought it of a Vulcan," Spock said.

"Nor I," Selek said sadly. Then, briskly, "It is your right to decree his punishment, Spock. He injured your bondmate. The only reason he did not kill him outright was that, knowing you would be aware of the moment of James's death, he wished, like the coward he has shown himself to be, to protect himself from justice by appearing to have an alibi by being in company at that time. Your call alerting security to the attack also alerted him to a danger he had not considered, for he had not realised that a Human could have a true bond."

"Yes." The coldnote in Spock's voice drove what little colour was still in Sher'la's face from it. "It is my right." Then Spock shook his head. "James would not wish me to judge in anger," he said quietly. "I am incapable of being objective about this matter. Let the Family Council decide."

"You are merciful," Selek said, but there was a note of approval in his voice.

"No," Spock said. "I wish only to be just, even to a traitor."

"Let him be housed in your brig," Selek said. "When we return to Vulcan, I will take charge of him. Will you be present at his trial?"

"I do not know," Spock said. "Much will depend on our orders. However, you know the facts. I trust your judgement and your verdict."

"You honour me."

Getting rid of Selek took some time; once it was accomplished, Spock sat slumped for some minutes before heaving himself to his feet and heading back to sickbay. Kirk, now lying propped on pillows, greeted him with a cheerful smile.

"How do you feel, Jim?"

"Not too bad. McCoy has me pumped full of painkillers, which could explain it."

Spock nodded. "I have been aware that you are no longer in pain."

"You could sense that through the bond?"

"Yes." He was silent for a moment, then, "I do not think Selek suspects anything - if indeed he ever did. I could have been over-sensitive to his attitude."

"I think you probably were. He seems to approve of me."

"Yes. I think he does."

"Did you find out why...?"

"Sher'la? A combination of reasons." He explained quickly.

"What will happen to him?"

"If I had my way, quite a lot...and none of it pleasant," Spock said grimly. "However, I abrogated my right to sentence him - I didn't trust myself to be impartial. The Family Council will deal with him - they have the right, and not even his family would seek to defend him. It is unlikely that they will even attempt to ransom him, as sometimes happens - not in the face of Selek's testimony. I suspect that Sendak, if he is present at the Council meeting, will demand the most severe punishment possible, if only to draw

suspicion from any possible involvement he might have had."

"Do you think he did?" McCoy asked curiously.

"I would doubt it. He wouldn't break his heart if we both dropped down dead tomorrow, but I don't think he's devious enough to try to hasten the process."

"The one thing I still don't understand," McCoy went on, "is what the Orions hoped to gain from all this."

"Disruption of the Babel conference," Spock replied. "The conference is due to discuss several important points regarding general defence and trade agreements with a number of planets that have so far remained neutral, attached to neither the Federation nor the Klingon Empire. Possibly Orion hoped to be able to slip in behind everyone's backs... Anyway, their little plan has fallen through, and the Babel conference will go on as planned."

Selek - in an expansive mood - was dining with Spock, McCoy, and a still-weak Kirk who, while now released from sickbay, had still not been permitted to return to even light duties. Conversation had been general throughout the meal; now, as they sipped coffee, Selek turned to something that had been puzzling him for some time.

"Spock - how did you know Sher'la's... employers... were the Orions?"

"Oh - it was a guess. A lucky one, I admit. We knew from the readings we had been able to obtain that the ship wasn't Klingon - or at least, it was of no known Klingon design. It wasn't a known Orion design either, but then we don't know much about Orion ship designs. So it was either a new type of Klingon design, an Orion design of a type we didn't know, or a completely alien race - one we hadn't encountered before. The chances of Sher'la's having been approached by a race we didn't know at all seemed very slight; so I took a chance on its being the Orions, who seemed slightly more likely, on the evidence, to be the guilty party." He had had time to think up a reasonable-sounding explanation.

"Yes, of course. I must admit, I initially thought it was the Klingons," Selek admitted.

They talked for a while longer; then McCoy bore Selek off, leaving Kirk and Spock together.

"You're turning into a good liar, Spock," Kirk said lazily.

Spock smiled. "Say, rather, a good actor," he replied. "If it comes to that, so are you - when someone else's safety depends on it. You still can't lie to save yourself." He was silent for a moment, then went on. "Jim - did you know - did the Captain ever say anything - about someone called Ferris, fifteen years ago?"

Kirk shook his head.

"I planted some false memories," Spock admitted. "Jim, he claimed that the Captain raped his son fifteen years ago, driving the boy to suicide."

"And that was why he hated you? Yes, I can see that it might be possible," Kirk said. "But I just don't know. Somehow, it seems almost unlikely - it's the sort of thing he would have boasted about, to me at least, and he never mentioned anything like that." He thought for a moment. "No - sometimes he used to imagine quite nasty things, put the images into my mind, recollections of things he'd done...but not that." Another moment, then - "If he had, you know, I don't think he would have let the boy go. Not immediately, anyway. He'd have held him, the way he did me."

"You think it never happened then, no matter what the boy told his father?"

"Fifteen years ago... Spock, it couldn't have happened! Pon farr - his

first pon farr was with me - it was why he trapped me! Before that, he wouldn't have been capable!"

They stared at each other. "Then why...?"

"Perhaps it was the other way about. Perhaps the boy wanted the Captain - and he turned nasty when he was turned down!"

"Jim, you could be right. But what a thing to inflict on his father for all those years."

"Yes." Kirk sighed. "We'll never know. Not now. What memory did you leave with Ferris?"

"Just that the boy was raped by someone unknown. Best leave it like that. It wouldn't be any better to let him suppose that it was his son who was... approaching other men."

Kirk nodded. Then, changing the subject, he said, "How about a game of chess?"

Spock smiled.

When McCoy returned, half an hour later, they were deeply engrossed in their game.

KIRK'S LOG

God, I'm tired. But I mustn't let Spock suspect. He's worried enough about me already. And our sensitivity to each other is definitely improving. Maybe one day we'll waken up and find we have a full bond without really trying.

It's been a hectic week, all in all. First the trip to Murasaki 312 that so nearly went completely wrong - well, we were able to salvage some data from it, and Boma at least has plenty to keep him occupied for weeks. I've got a fair amount myself, too. Then keeping Seleok from suspecting anything is quite a strain, especially since only McCoy, of all the crew, knows what the Vulcans believe Spock and me to be. Fortunately, we can pass off a certain amount of 'keeping distance' as being necessary to maintain discipline.

Sher'la's attack on me, though, was more draining than I want Spock to realise. I was luckier than he realises, I know; if the blood from my injury had gathered in my lungs, I could have drowned in my own blood before I was found, as I have little doubt Sher'la intended even though he did not admit it. Bones knows, but he didn't labour the point when he reported to Spock. Also, even breathing is painful, and will be while the scar tissue is still so fresh.

Then Ferris. I can feel sorry for him; living for all those years believing a lie. Yes, I can believe his son lied to him. The Captain would have boasted to me, I'm quite sure, of any previous sexual experiences he had had. He always led me to believe that I was his only...victim.

Tomorrow we return to Vanla. I wish my memories of the place were less unhappy. My beautiful Sheba...but if you had lived, you would have been unhappy, for you were a one-man cat and I was your man. You would never have been able to understand why I had to leave you.

Well, at least I won't have to beam down - I can stay on the ship, meet Chief Lanyo here and then avoid him as much as possible. I hope Spock doesn't have too many problems, though, in dealing with him. I can't tell him much of the Captain's relationship with Lanyo.

Well, it'll only be for twenty-four hours. Perhaps then, with the ship in orbit around Babel, we'll get a little time to ourselves.

VANLA

Kirk threw down his stylus and glared at the darkening viewscreen. "I wish Starfleet Command would remember I'm supposed to be First Officer of the Enterprise!" he growled. "Go here, investigate that, check out the other... And when I am here I only get enough time to clear the backlog of work before I'm off again!"

Spock, who on entering the briefing room had been greeted with the heartfelt complaint, glanced at his friend enquiringly.

"First it was the Amerind Project, then Troyius, then the standing order that took us into the Murasaki Effect - now this!" the Human continued. "They seem to forget that we've got a shipload of very touchy diplomats. How do they expect us to cope if I keep getting landed with extra duties?"

"Perhaps you had better tell me what 'this' is," Spock suggested, hiding his enjoyment of Kirk's flash of irritation. It was satisfying to see him react normally -- once, he would never have dared complain about anything.

Kirk grinned ruefully. "It's a tie-in with the Amerind Project, and since our next call is to pick up the Paramount Chief of Vanla, somebody back at Starfleet thought it would be the ideal opportunity for me to investigate."

"Investigate what?" Spock asked, puzzled.

"You know the Vanlans are really Vulcans, another of the races seeded by the Preservers? Apparently there are some remains on the planet that could tie in with the Amerind base. I didn't see them myself last time I was there, but I reported what I was told about them. Now Starfleet wants a full record."

"There will not be time," Spock objected. For some reason he felt vaguely uneasy. "We must pick up Chief Lanyo, then continue to Babel."

"That's what you'll be doing, yes," Kirk agreed. "I'm to stay behind on Vanla to conduct the investigation, and you've to pick me up when you bring the Chief back."

"No!" Spock's refusal was instant, automatic. "I will not leave you alone..."

"You have no choice - it's a direct order. It's all right, Spock. I know the planet, and thanks to you I speak the language now... My only real objection is that I won't be with you...and you'll have to cope with the delegates alone."

"I have done so before," Spock said, a trifle wryly. "Before I agree, has McCoy passed you fully fit? I do not like the idea of your being out of reach of a doctor so soon after your injury."

"It's all right, Spock. There is a Vulcan delegation on Vanla. If I should need a doctor, I will contact the Healer there. And checking out old ruins can't be called anything but light work."

Spock still looked doubtful, but simply said, "what arrangements do you wish to make, Jim?"

"There are none I can make until we reach Vanla. From what I was told the remains lie in Remoran territory. I'll have to ask Lanyo to arrange permission for me to visit the tribal lands."

"Will he co-operate? You told me that at first contact the Vanlans would only negotiate with Vulcans."

"They've had a few years in the Federation since then. Besides, I asked Selek how his mission there had gone - apparently he's been back there recently, and Lanyo was very impressed to learn that I'm now the son of Selek's brother. Vanlans have never lost the strong Vulcan sense of family. I'll be able to bask in Selek's reflected glory."

"Then there should be no difficulties," Spock commented, but after a moment he added determinedly, "Nevertheless, I will assign you a security escort - just in case."

In view of Starfleet's orders, when the Enterprise reached Vanla Spock requested permission to beam down with Kirk to speak with Lanyo, Paramount Chief of the Tribes. Selek accompanied them, partly out of interest in the mission, and partly - at Spock's request - to underline Kirk's importance in the eyes of Vulcan.

He was pleased to do so. Almost from the beginning, the distinguished diplomat had been favourably impressed by his nephew's chosen mate. The Human was intelligent, clear-headed for one of his race, and it was admitted that his shy charm was pleasing. True, he had felt some doubts when Spock had first declared his intention of bonding with the Human, but subsequent events had reassured him that Spock could not have chosen better.

Only recently the Human had contacted him regarding the Amerind Project. It was a delicate situation, and it was indeed well that someone in authority should keep an eye on the conduct of the investigation there, but Selek was pleased that Kirk had seen the problem and drawn it to his attention. Indeed, he was a valuable asset to the family, and brought honour to the clan.

Chief Lanyo received the party with delight. Selek was well-known to him from the visits he had made in connection with Vanla's entry into the Federation, but he had not seen the Enterprise men since the initial contact.

"Welcome back to Vanla, Captain Spock! And greetings to your Companion. I am pleased that it is your ship that is to convey me to Babel. And Ambassador Selek - well met again. I anticipate this journey with pleasure."

"We come to serve," Spock replied formally. "Chief Lanyo, I ask that you permit Commander Kirk to remain on Vanla."

"Oh?" The Chief turned to Kirk. "You are welcome, of course, Commander, but your presence will be missed on the Enterprise. In what way may we serve you?"

"Last time I was here I heard about some ruins in the territory of the Remorans," Kirk replied. "My superiors believe that they may be connected with another investigation being carried out by Starfleet. I request your permission, and your assistance, to study them."

"Such a small thing is easily arranged." Lanyo beckoned to one of the tribal chiefs who stood nearby. "Tama, will you offer the shelter of your tents to my guest-friends?"

"I would be honoured, my Chief." Tama extended his hand to Kirk in the warriors' greeting. "Commander Kirk, accept our service."

"Thank you, Tama. I am honoured."

In response to Spock's gesture one of the security guards who had accompanied the party stepped forward to stand at Kirk's shoulder.

"My Companion's attendant will, of course, accompany him," Spock said evenly.

"Of course." Tama showed no surprise - it was expected that someone in Kirk's position should have a personal servant, and the guard had been forewarned what to expect.

Spock's eyes caught and held Kirk's, but he spoke to the Chief. "If you are ready, sir, we should return to the ship."

"Indeed." Lanyo moved closer to Spock. "I have heard much about the Enterprise from Selek - I am anxious to see her."

Disregarding protocol, Spock drew Kirk a little to one side; they exchanged a few words inaudible to the others, then Kirk joined Tama, and Spock returned to the waiting party.

Shaking off an illogical impulse to seize Kirk's arm and include him in the party, Spock pulled out his communicator. "Energise."

The following morning Kirk set off for the main Remoran encampment, a vast tented city deep within the southern desert. It was a small party, consisting of, beside Kirk himself, Chief Tama, his son Malor, and Kirk's escort, Lt. Gilman from security. They were guarded by a troop of a dozen Remoran warriors, and a party of servants and attendants rode ahead.

As an honoured guest, Kirk's place was between Tama and Malor. The two Remorans questioned him eagerly - being of one of the richest tribes of Vanla, they were anxious to learn as much as they could of the mother planet, and the opportunities it offered for a flourishing trade.

"We would learn as much as you can tell us, Kirk," Tama said earnestly. "It is clear that customs and manners are different on Vulcan; as one who has himself adopted those customs, you can understand our eagerness to learn."

"Of course," Kirk replied. "I'll be pleased to help in any way I can. With me, it doesn't matter if you make a mistake, but a Vulcan would be offended if, for example, you were to make what you considered polite enquiries about his bondmate."

"Is it not difficult for you?" Malor asked. "You are of one race, living by the customs of another...it must cause problems."

"Not as often as you might think. On the ship, most of the crewmembers are Human, and it's Spock who has to adjust. On Vulcan I do tend to conform to Vulcan customs, of course. I've become accustomed to making the switch."

"Selek speaks highly of you," Tama commented. "He once told Chief Lanyo that he envied his brother two such fine sons."

"Selek is generous," Kirk said quietly. There was a hint of calculation in Tama's voice that made him uneasy. Shrugging, he dismissed it as merely the Remoran's confusion over his exact place in Vulcan society, and settled down to enjoy the ride.

A few hours later they topped a rise to see the tented city of Remora spread out in the fertile valley below them. Kirk had heard of it, and the sight was as unusual and as colourful as he had expected. In all the vast, sprawling expanse there was not one permanent building; instead, each household consisted of a cluster of gaily-dyed tents grouped closely together, each group separated from its neighbours by wide paths. There was no poor quarter, for its dwellers all belonged to one of the households, either as members or servants, and lived as such. Kirk knew already that the Remorans considered their servants as in some degree belonging to the family, dependents whose welfare was the responsibility of the head of the household.

The party rose into the largest group of tents, and dismounted; a young woman came forward to greet them.

"Welcome, father - and welcome to the guest."

"My daughter, Tavara," Tama said proudly. "Daughter, you give welcome to Commander Kirk."

Kirk bowed. "Peace to your household, Lady," he said, smiling.

"My father's messenger told us of your coming, Kirk." Tavara eyed him with interest as she spoke. "Forgive me - you are the first off-worlder I have seen, and I hope you will be generous enough to tell me something of your world."

"I'll be pleased to, Lady Tavara."

"It was my thought," Tama broke in, "that my daughter might guide you on your investigation of the ruins. She knows them well."

"It would be an honour and a pleasure for me, Tama," Kirk said. He paused for a moment, then continued. "It occurs to me that as a stranger to your tents, there are many of your customs with which I am as yet unfamiliar. I may offend through ignorance."

"That is well thought of, guest. It is also true that we may breach some custom of yours. We will agree, therefore, that if offence is caused we will speak of it openly, without rancour, and so repetition will be avoided."

"A wise suggestion, Tama." Kirk breathed a sigh of relief, for he had no illusions - in a society such as this, even an unwitting error could result in bloodshed.

Tavara brought wine, and the four drank it together, then Malor showed Kirk to the guest tent. Servants were assigned to him, which relieved his embarrassment - he would have disliked having Gilman wait on him, even though the security guard seemed quite prepared to do so if necessary. Malor had taken it for granted, however, that Gilman's main duty was to protect Kirk; he indicated that the small room just inside the tent door was for the security guard's use, an arrangement which pleased Kirk - although he was confident enough with Spock, he disliked sharing a room with anyone else.

Tama had said that after the long ride they would retire early; the servants brought food, waiting on both Humans as a matter of course, though naturally Kirk was served first. After the meal a bath was prepared, and Kirk dismissed the servants while he used it.

He emerged from the screened-off section of the tent, and grinned ruefully at Gilman. "Sorry," he apologised, "but you're expected to use the same water."

"Don't trouble yourself about that, sir," the security man grinned in response. "That's no hardship compared to some of the things I've had to put up with."

He withdrew and washed quickly, then called the servants to remove the bath while Kirk slid into bed.

When they were alone, Gilman approached Kirk. "Anything else, sir?"

"No, thank you, Gilman. Go and get some rest. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, sir. Sleep well."

The following morning, after an early breakfast, Kirk and Tavara rode out of Remora, followed at a discreet distance by the watchful Gilman. The ruins were about two hours ride away, and consisted, Kirk discovered, of a few half-crumbling walls. It was possible to tell that they had once been part of a building of considerable size, but they certainly bore no resemblance to the clean, perfectly preserved obelisk of the Amerind Planet.

"This is not what you seek?" Tavara asked, seeing Kirk's look of disappointment.

"I'm not sure. I'd like to take a closer look."

Kirk glanced around. They had reached a small oasis, a cluster of fruit bushes grouped around a tiny pool. It might be, he thought, that the walls had once formed part of a shelter for visitors to the oasis, but as far back as records went this had been Remoran land, and the Remorans had never erected such buildings. That decided him. He dismounted and tethered his horse.

"Gilman, you wait here," he instructed. "Tavara..."

"I'd like to come with you. Perhaps I can help."

Together they examined the crumbling walls, which had been built of a type of brick and overlaid by a coating of plaster. Kirk took samples for later analysis, and used his tricorder to record all possible detail of the building - it might be possible to reconstruct its probable form.

There was a point where two walls met at what was not quite a right angle - the building must have been of very unusual shape, he thought. He looked at the unbroken expanse of plaster, and suddenly realised that its colouring

was uneven. He stepped back, half squinting, for a better view, and saw that the darker patches formed signs that were not unfamiliar to him - they resembled the symbols on the Obelisk.

Aware of his interest, Tavara stepped closer. "What have you found?"

"Those patches - it's a form of writing. I've seen it before."

"Can you read it? What does it say?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't know. It's based on musical notes, and I'm no musician. I wish Spock was here - he could decipher it." He adjusted his tricorder, scanning the entire wall, then each symbol in close-up. "I'll study these later - perhaps I can make some sense of them. Tavara, do you think your father would lend me some workmen? I'd like to do a bit of excavation around here, to see what else I can learn."

"I will speak to him, Kirk," Tavara promised. "Will you come and eat now? I have brought food."

"Thank you." Kirk helped her down the slight slope to the edge of the pool, an instinctive courtesy that was not really necessary, for Tavara moved with an easy, relaxed grace. This was no pampered aristocrat - her clothes, though rich, were cut for freedom of movement, and he remembered that Remoran women were trained to fight in defence of their households.

She would be a companion to trust, to depend on, he instinctively felt, and was pleased that a woman of her beauty and spirit had not been born into one of the tribes where the females were kept in subjugation. It was not unusual for a Remoran warrior to choose a male mate, but the majority preferred women; and since they understood very well that both parents contributed to the resulting offspring, the more docile females of other tribes were looked on with some disfavour as tending to pass on a certain weakness to their children.

Tavara displayed also her tribe's more humane attitude to their servants. As they sat down to eat she made it clear that Gilman was expected to eat a little apart, but he was given an equal share of the same food she produced for herself and Kirk, and when he brought a cloak for her to sit on she thanked him with a smile.

Nor was it simply because Gilman was an offworlder; Kirk had already seen that she, her father and her brother treated the household servants with the same courtesy. Although still retaining much of their warlike nature the Remorans were much closer to the Vulcans than any of the other tribes. Kirk remarked on the fact, and she explained a little of their beliefs.

"We are taught that high birth is a privilege not to be abused. We are responsible for the lives and well-being of those who serve us - only a coward uses his strength against the weak. Is it not so on your world, Kirk?"

"That's our ideal," Kirk said slowly. "Not all have achieved it yet, though." His eyes darkened for a moment as he recalled one man who would never have understood that teaching, and he sighed. "One day, perhaps..."

Tavara glanced at him curiously. "Tell me about your world," she said. "Tell me about Vulcan, about your ship, about the worlds you have seen. Tell me of this Spock, who commands your loyalty." As she spoke she took a sketching block from her bag and began to draw, shooting quick glances at the Human as he did so.

Kirk smiled and began to speak, telling her of some of the many planets he had visited. He described the Enterprise and her crew, making the girl laugh as with deft touches he brought his friends vividly alive for her. If she noticed that he said little about himself she made no comment, only urged him on with eager questions.

"...so Chekov finished up in quite a state," Kirk ended at last. "He still hasn't figured it out, but I saw Sulu switch the water back to pure vodka."

Serves him right for cheating."

"I'd like to meet them all one day." Tavana handed Kirk the pad. "What do you think of it?"

"This is beautiful!" Kirk's voice rang with enthusiasm. "Tavana, why haven't you taken this up seriously?"

"It is not expected of me. That is why I long to leave Vanla, to travel, to study... But it is not permitted."

"T'Pau would love this." Kirk gazed at the drawing again.

"It is yours." She glanced at him sideways. "T'Pau is...your wife?" she asked.

"No, I have no wife. T'Pau is my mother - my adopted mother, really. She and Sarek are Spock's parents. My own died when I was a child."

"So did my mother. She was very beautiful."

"If she resembled her daughter she must have been lovely. You must go on with your work Tavana. Perhaps now that Vanla has joined the Federation it will be possible."

"Perhaps." The girl rose and began to gather up the remains of the meal. "I think it is time we returned, Kirk. You will wish to speak to my father about the excavations."

"Yes - there's a lot to do." Kirk raised his voice. "Gilman, come and lend a hand."

The servants supplied by Tama worked diligently under Kirk's direction to uncover more of the ruined walls. Great care was necessary, since the plaster-like coating crumbled at the least touch - Kirk soon found it best to leave Gilman to supervise the removal of the bulk of the sand while he concentrated on brushing away the final layer and recording the symbols that were exposed.

Occasionally Tama and Malor rode out to watch the progress of the work, but it was more out of courtesy than interest, Kirk guessed. Tavana was a much more regular visitor, coming most days to bring food, and to insist that he take a break to eat it. As they sat they talked, for the girl had an insatiable curiosity about Vulcan. Quick-witted and shrewd, she remembered everything he told her; but although he enjoyed her company Kirk found himself longing for the sort of conversation he could have with Spock - with Tavana, he felt more like a schoolmaster than an equal.

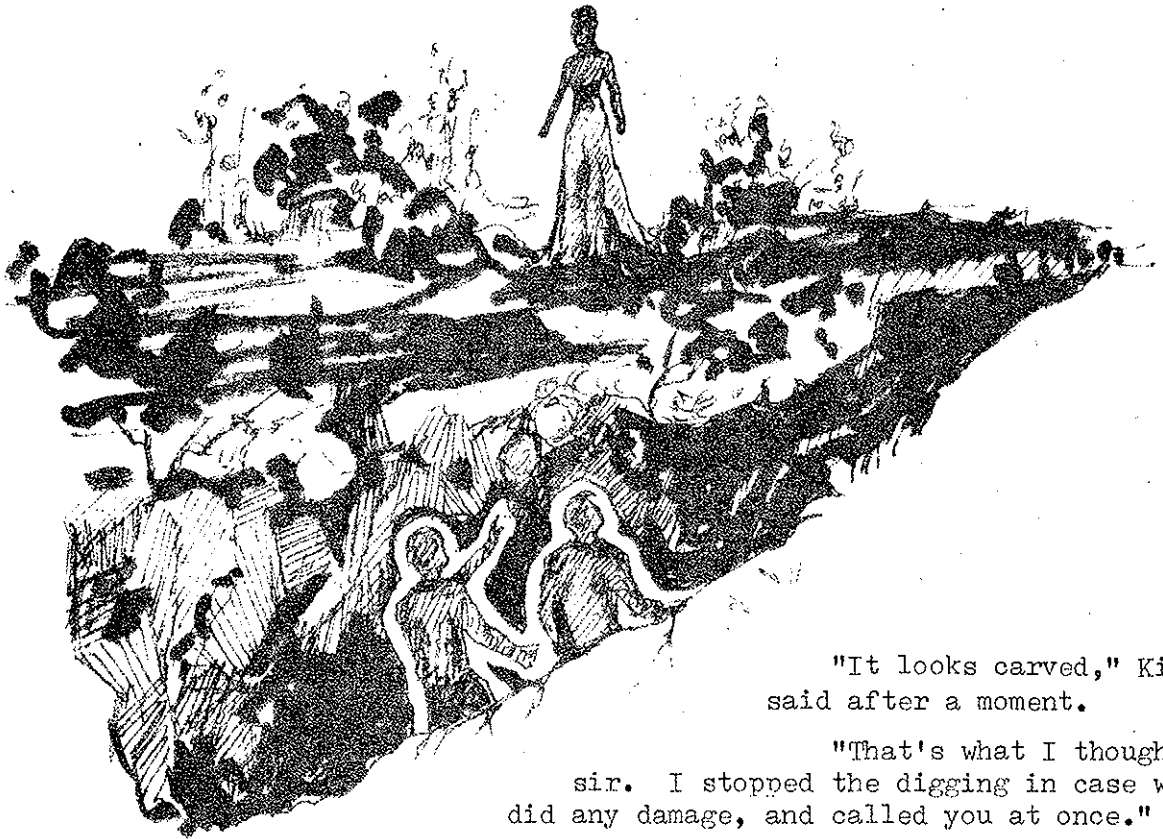
He was grateful, however, for her help with his work. She was deft enough to tackle the more delicate excavations, and it was she, with her artist's eye, who pointed out that what he had taken to be patches of discolouration in the plaster were, in fact, traces of a much paler pigment that formed a distinct, though at the moment meaningless, pattern.

One afternoon they were just thinking of returning to work after their break when Gilman approached, clearly excited.

"Can you come, sir? There's something I think you should see."

Kirk jumped to his feet and followed the man. The labourers had begun to cut a trench diagonally across what had been the interior of the ruined building - Kirk was anxious to reach floor level, and he hoped that away from the walls they might discover artefacts that would provide a clue to the purpose of the building.

"There, sir." Gilman pointed into the trench, and Kirk crouched down for a better look. Protruding from the surface was a slab of black stone, totally unlike anything else in the area; its surface was smooth and shining, as though it had been polished.



"It looks carved," Kirk said after a moment.

"That's what I thought, sir. I stopped the digging in case we did any damage, and called you at once."

"I'll go down and have a look," Kirk decided. Gilman caught his arm.

"Be careful, sir. You don't want to hurt yourself, strain your back..."

Kirk looked at him, and smiled ruefully. "Who told you to nursemaid me? The Captain, or Dr. McCoy...?"

Gilman smiled back. "Both of them, sir."

"I'll tell them you did your duty. But I'm perfectly fit again." He jumped down into the trench. Gilman followed, and the men examined the stone more closely, Gilman, however, keeping half an eye on Kirk in case he decided to start pulling at it.

At last Kirk stood back. "Put all the men into this excavation, but tell them to be careful," he ordered. "I'll record each section as it's exposed. I think...concentrate on uncovering this side for now - it looks as if it has more of those symbols on it. Eventually I'll want to lift it out, but we'd better see it in position first."

"Right, sir." Gilman looked around the small space. "If you'd like to wait up top, Mr. Kirk, it'll give the men more room."

"Right." Kirk accepted Gilman's help out of the trench, and watched as two of the labourers took his place. He recorded the excavation carefully, step by step, occasionally ordering the trench cleared so that he could go down to record in detail.

He observed that Gilman directed the workmen wisely; despite Kirk's order to put all the men onto the job there was not, in fact, room for more than two at a time. Gilman changed over the pairs at frequent intervals, making sure that no-one was overstrained in the cramped, hot conditions. Kirk mentally noted the man as a reliable, conscientious subordinate who could be relied on to get the job done in the more efficient way.

At last Gilman called to him again. "I think we've reached the base, sir."

"Okay, I'm coming down."

"Be careful, Mr. Kirk - we really should shore this trench up before we go any further."

"I'll just take a quick look first."

One of the workmen had improvised a rope ladder, and Kirk descended into the trench, which was now about twelve feet deep, he judged. The labourers climbed out, and Gilman played a flashlight over the exposed stone.

"Look here, sir - and there." The light moved, revealing the carvings, and Kirk drew in his breath.

"Humanoid - but not Human. Or any known race. I wonder...could they actually be the Preservers themselves?"

"Possibly, sir, but... Miss, get back! Sir, look out!""

For an instant Kirk caught a glimpse of Tavara's shocked face as she teetered at the edge of the trench, caught just in time by one of the workmen, then the breath was knocked from his body as Gilman pushed him to the ground. As the security man's body covered his Kirk only had time to register that the sides of the trench, dislodged by Tavara's careless step, were caving in on them before he was buried in a smothering, choking shower of fine sand. The last thing he heard was Tavara's wail of fear and disbelief, then all sight and sound vanished in a dark, suffocating blanket of unconsciousness.

He came slowly awake, every muscle in his body aching. His throat felt raw, it hurt to breathe, and a dull throbbing behind his eyes interfered with his vision. He was vaguely aware that an arm encircled his shoulders, assisting him to sit up; a cup was pressed to his lips and he drank thirstily, grateful for the soothing moisture. A voice spoke, and he answered it dreamily, scarcely aware of what he was saying, for his mind seemed to be clouded by a thick haze. The cup was offered again, a bitter draught this time, and he was eased slowly back onto the bed. Sleep hovered, and he welcomed it eagerly, for somewhere on the verge of his consciousness a demanding question was repeated over and over again, its implications filling him with a fear he did not dare contemplate.

Who am I? Who am I? Who...?

"My father, if it pleases you, I would speak with you." Tavara entered Tama's tent, her hands outstretched in ritual supplication.

"Enter, my daughter - I will hear you." Tama smiled indulgently. Malor was a son to be proud of, but his lovely daughter held his heart. Everyone loved her, indulged her least whim, yet she had remained sweet-natured and unspoiled.

"Do you have a request to make?" Malor too smiled at his sister, wondering what had taken her fancy this time - the new mare, perhaps?

"A thought has come to me which my father may care to consider," the girl replied, joining Tama on his couch. "I intend no disrespect, and as always I will be guided by your wishes, but an opportunity has arisen which I wish to place before you."

"I know that you are an obedient daughter. Say what you will."

"Although you have not yet spoken to me of this, I am aware that you and Malor have begun to consider the question of my marriage. As a daughter of the Remora, I could bring you an alliance with any of our tribes - is it not so?"

"Indeed, Tavara. You are fit to be the wife even of a Paramount Chief."

"My father honours me. However, our tribe is strong and rich. The question I have asked myself is, what benefit can my marriage bring to my people?"

"And how did you answer?" Tama sat up alertly, impressed by his daughter's

grasp of political reality.

"I answered that my marriage into another tribe could only benefit my husband's people, not us. Then, my father, I asked myself if there was not another possibility."

"And is there?" Malor too was all attention.

"There is... The Human Kirk. He is a member of one of the ruling families on Vulcan, and he has no wife. Would not such a husband bring you powerful allies, my father? Chief Lanyo would surely listen in Council to one who was marriage-kin to the Vulcan Ambassador."

Tama considered for a moment. "Would such a match please you, my daughter, or do you think only of your people?"

"To speak truth, father, I wish the Human as husband, although I would not ask this if I did not see the advantages also."

"Negotiations would be prolonged," Tama murmured. "Yet it would indeed bring me much power. When Ambassador Selek returns, I will..."

"Forgive me, father," Tavera interrupted, "but it also occurred to me that - perhaps - Selek might not permit his kinsman to wed a...a barbarian. Although Human, Kirk follows Vulcan custom - he would not marry against the wishes of his family."

"True...in comparison to the Vulcans we are barbarians. Yet if you would have this man, he will be yours."

"There is a way." Tavera looked down demurely. "You are skilled in the control of minds. Kirk is very weak from his accident, and his memory is clouded. It seems to me..."

"Yes, my daughter?"

"I thought that perhaps you might know of a way to...to use his condition. He remembers little - you could convince him that we are already betrothed, and once that belief is firmly implanted in his mind, he will not refuse the marriage. By the time the Ambassador returns, I will be with child, and my husband cannot then reject me without bringing shame on all our people. All of Vanla would rise in outrage - and the Vulcans would not permit that."

"You are clever, daughter. I will do as you wish. Malor will assist me - he has seen much of Kirk, and together we will mould his memory to our liking. Go to your women, Tavera, and prepare for your wedding."

"Thank you, my father." Tavera rose and bowed her head in respectful gratitude.

Safely back in her tent Tavera dismissed her women and threw herself onto the bed, trembling with reaction. She had won! Thank all the gods, her father had quickly seen the advantages to be gained by an alliance with Kirk's powerful Vulcan family. Fortunate that self-interest and policy had combined so well with her wishes. Indulgent Tama might be, but he would not have allowed his daughter to marry Kirk simply because she wanted him, but since there was much to be gained, he had willingly granted her request.

Tavera stretched luxuriously, reviewing what must be done - and quickly. It would be simple enough to plant false memories in the Human's mind, and since he trusted her now, he would instinctively do so later. Her story was already prepared, lies woven with enough truth to be easily believable. And once he was convinced, the marriage ceremony would make him hers.

Her strongest hold on him would be the marriage-tie; she wondered how long it would be before she knew him well enough to form it, for when she had achieved that, he would not wish to leave her, even if he recovered his memory. And...without precautions, which she had no intention of taking, women of her tribe invariably became pregnant immediately; once she carried his child, her position would indeed be inviolable.

Indeed, she had been clever. Her father had never guessed how much she had always dreaded the thought of marriage. She had seen how the women of other tribes lived, either as pampered dolls or as necessary but resented child-bearers. Remoran women at least were equal to their men, but as a chief's daughter she could not marry within the tribe, and wherever she went she would be expected to adopt the customs of her husband's people.

Kirk, she had seen, was gentle, considerate, and in the Federation, women had a much greater control over their lives. Even if he resented her later, when he regained his memory, she would be far better off with him than she would be as the wife of a Vanlan.

And...perhaps he would not resent her. Perhaps, the first shock over, he would welcome her as his wife. She knew that he considered her beautiful, and she had been well-trained for the position she would one day fill. If the gods would only cloud his mind until she had formed the marriage tie, she was sure that he would accept the situation, even find pleasure in it. She knew that she would make a good wife...

With a sudden surge of energy she rose and called her women. There was much to do.

In the chief's tent Malor looked enquiringly at Tama. "You did not tell her, father. Why?"

"I gamble, my son. If your sister knew that Kirk was handfasted to the Vulcan she would insist on seeking his consent, and I am not certain that he would give it. I do know that on his world, as on ours, it is permissible to take a wife as well as a male mate, and I believe that given an accomplished fact, the Vulcan will accept it. I want this marriage. Ambassador Selek has often spoken of Kirk, and an alliance with him will greatly increase our prestige, not to mention the wealth that will come through trade links with that family." The chief's teeth flashed in a grin. "Moreover, I like the Human - he is gentle, but he has spirit. And Tavara wants him."

"I hope that you are correct, father." Malor was troubled. "I too like Kirk - but Spock is an unknown."

"Yet we have a lever to use against him - his mate's happiness. He will not, I think, distress Kirk. Vulcans are possessive, but also extremely protective - he will not shame Kirk by refusing to accept the wife his mate has - to all appearances - chosen freely."

"That makes sense. Will you require my aid, father?"

"Yes. We will not attempt anything elaborate, I think. When he has been prepared by drugs, you, Tavara and I will all tell him the same story - that he has promised to marry my daughter. When he wakes that conviction will be part of him - he will seem to 'remember' it. For the rest, we will not attempt to alter his memory, only to cloud it further so that he does not remember too soon. We will deal only with the time he has spent among us."

"I see - we speak then only of what we know, and of what we wish him to believe."

"Exactly. Come, Malor - help me mix the drugs. We must act swiftly."

Kirk struggled slowly awake, narrowing his eyes to focus on the face leaning over him. For a moment he struggled to remember, then his expression lightened.

"Tavara?" he whispered.

"You are awake, Kirk. That is good." A warm hand brushed his cheek. "How do you feel?"

"As though someone tried to trample me to death." Kirk accepted her assistance to sit up, wincing as his muscles complained. "What happened?"

"The trench caved in - do you not remember?"

Kirk frowned in confusion. "Trench? No...it means nothing... Tavera, I know you - but I can't remember my own name!"

"The healer warned us of this. He is sure that the loss of memory is temporary, Kirk."

"Kirk? Is that my name?"

"You are Commander Kirk, an officer in Starfleet, here on Vanla to investigate some of our ruins. Your ship will return for you in a few weeks. Three days ago you were at the oasis excavating the ruins, and a trench collapsed. You and one of your men were buried."

"That...sounds familiar, but I can't... You said one of my men? What happened to him? Is he all right?" Kirk demanded sharply.

Truly, this man was a leader, Tavera thought; he was more concerned about the fate of his men than his own. "I'm sorry," she replied. "When the trench collapsed, Lt. Gilman covered your body with his own, providing a breathing space for you. By the time we reached you he had suffocated. He has been buried with honour."

"Thank you." Kirk's mind provided a fleeting glimpse of the stocky, reliable security officer who had given his life to save his commander. "I hate losing one of my men," he continued. "I should have prevented it somehow."

"There was nothing you could have done," Tavera assured him, carefully saying nothing of her own part in the cave-in. "The trench seemed safe enough - he said so himself before he called you down."

Kirk looked unconvinced, and she continued swiftly, "The healer thinks that your memory will return gradually, both of its own accord and as you encounter things that you knew. Please don't worry about it - after all, you remember me - don't you?"

"Of course." Kirk smiled up into the beautiful, concerned face. "And there was...Tama?...and...was it Malor?"

"Malor, my brother, and Tama is my father. You see, Kirk, you are remembering already." She returned his smile, then, taking a calculated risk, allowed it to fade and gazed at him unhappily.

"Tavera, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She turned her face aside, her eyes shining with tears. "It's only...we were to be married in two days...and I was so happy..."

"Married? Yes, I remember...I think..." Kirk frowned in concentration.

"The last time you visited Vanla you asked my father for my hand; on this visit you intended to combine your official duties with our marriage. But now..." Tavera choked back a sob. "We have waited and planned for this - it is hard for me to lose it now..."

"We need not...lose it," Kirk said slowly, troubled by her distress. "If I'm physically fit - and I feel it - there's no reason why we shouldn't carry on as we planned."

A smile of joy lit her face. "Oh, Kirk - thank you! Since the day of our betrothal I have longed to be your wife."

She leaned against him, and automatically his arms closed about her. He could not remember the betrothal, but surely there was something...

A veil lifted in his mind for a moment, and he saw the intent, vulcanoid faces, felt his hand taken in a firm clasp, heard his own voice repeating words that he could not quite hear, but which had all the solemnity of a vow.

One beloved face, hidden from his sight, hovered close, and he sighed with relief - if the memory was not as clear as he would have wished, he did at least recall the solemnity of the betrothal ceremony.

Reluctantly, Tavana pulled away. "You must sleep, my Kirk. Tomorrow my father will remind you of the marriage ceremony." Stooping, she brushed his lips with her fingers. "Sleep well, my love."

When she had gone Kirk settled back against the pillows, aware of a vast sense of relief. At least he had not wakened among strangers, but with friends who would fill in the gaps in his memory until he remembered of his own accord. He was confident that his memory would return - already there were glimpses of faces, of a great silver ship... He need only be patient, and he would remember everything...

The following day Kirk was feeling so much better that the Remoran physician allowed him to get up, provided he took things easily - there was no point, he said bluntly, in coddling a perfectly healthy body.

"Just like Bones," Kirk grinned when the physician had left.

"Bones?" Tavana looked puzzled. "What is 'Bones'?"

"My friend. He's a doctor... Tavana! I remembered him!" Kirk's eyes shone with excitement.

"You see? I told you there was nothing to worry about." Tavana hoped fervently that Tama's interference would last until after the marriage. Kirk had accepted her story unquestioningly, but if his memory returned too soon he would remember that he had not agreed to the marriage.

Malor, who had joined them for a stroll around the city, was hoping the same thing and for the same reason. Tama had concentrated on burying Kirk's memories of his Vulcan mate, planting a powerful compulsion to visualise Tavana's face if his thoughts should turn in that direction. They could not be sure how long the suggestion would last, however - the drug-aided conditioning had never been tried on a Human.

Although he would not have dreamed of opposing his father, Malor was uneasy about what would happen when the Enterprise returned. He had watched Spock bid farewell to his mate, and there had been something in the Vulcan's eyes - an almost possessive concern - that made him wonder if Spock would accept the situation as calmly as Tama supposed. Certainly if his mate had taken a wife without his consent, he would demand vengeance...but the Vulcans, he comforted himself, were said to be a logical race. Spock would see that there was nothing he could do but accept Kirk's wife, unless he wished to provoke open war with her kin. And that was unlikely. Still, for Tavana's sake, he would be glad when that first meeting was over...

Steadily, eyes demurely downcast, Tavana walked the short symbolic distance from her father's tent to her husband's. She was grateful that the cloak muffled her so completely that she had to rely on her women for guidance - she would have found it hard to conceal the blend of triumph, relief, and apprehension that filled her.

Remoran women, though chaste, were not ignorant. She had long known what she could expect from a husband of her own race, and she had not anticipated the experience with any pleasure. Not that she expected to enjoy belonging to Kirk either, but she was sure that the gentle young Human would be a considerate, undemanding husband, patient with her fears as no Remoran would be, until she gained the confidence to be a good wife. At one point, certainly, when they had shared the marriage cup, he had turned suddenly pale, swaying on his feet as though about to collapse; almost immediately he had recovered, saying that he had felt dizzy for a moment, and the ceremony had continued without interruption.

It would be much easier, Tavara thought, when the marriage tie had been formed between them. She would make the attempt as soon as possible. It was curious that although Kirk must know of the Vulcan mental union, he had never asked if the Vanlans shared that ability. She wondered why, then dismissed the question with a shrug - perhaps he had simply not thought of it. Well, he would learn...

Once within the tent the women removed her cloak, leaving her clad only in a thin silk gown. She looked around, smiling at Kirk, who had risen to greet her. He was unusually flushed, his eyes bright, and she nodded - Tama had given him some drugged wine, an additional precaution to ensure the consummation of the marriage.

Tavara waited until her women had left, then she walked over and placed her hands on Kirk's shoulders, smiling into his eyes. "Do I please you, my husband?" she teased.

"You are...very beautiful," Kirk replied hesitantly, and Tavara suddenly realised that he was desperately shy. It was not that he did not know what to do, but it was clear that she would have to make the advances, a reassuring prospect for a girl raised in the expectation of having to satisfy a demanding husband. Perhaps it was a custom of these Humans, that they were prepared to allow the woman to indicate her readiness? If so, she approved.

The genuine affection that she felt for Kirk shone in her eyes as she leaned closer, raising her mouth to his. The touch of his lips was very pleasant, and his arms instinctively went round her, holding her close.

"Come, husband," Tavara murmured. "Give me a son, for your people and mine."

Several nights later, Tavara sat in meditation, gathering her strength for the effort needed to link her mind with Kirk's. She knew what to do, for the wise women of the tribe had prepared her for this, as they had prepared her for all aspects of marriage.

Well...almost all. A flicker of distaste marred her lovely face for a moment. She did not entirely blame Kirk - he had indeed been as gentle as she had hoped - but nothing had prepared her for the physical pain she had endured.

Strangely, she had been the one to comfort Kirk as he held her, whispering stammered apologies; the first time was always difficult, she had murmured - it would become easier.

He had believed her, and had tried again. Determined not to startle him, she had concealed her pain until her voice betrayed her, and she had given a faint moan of agony. Unfortunately, Kirk had mistaken it for a cry of pleasure, and had prolonged his lovemaking in an effort to please her; she had been almost unconscious from pain by the time he released her.

In one way, the pain had been worth it. When he realised what he had done, Kirk's shamed guilt had given her another hold over him. She had made him try again and again, this time making sure he knew of her pain, subtly reminding him that it was his duty to please her, knowing that he saw his



failure as a debt to be repaid.

Tonight she would form the marriage tie, and then it would no longer be necessary for them to sleep together each night. He would not insist on his rights, as a Vanlan male would have done, for he was too gentle and courteous to give pain willingly.

There was one return she could make for her deception, one she was sure would please him. She rose and passed through the curtain to join him on the bed, smiling as he reached for her hand.

"Husband, if it pleases you, I bear our son."

"A child? That's marvellous. But how can you tell so soon? I mean..." He broke off, colouring faintly.

Tavara laughed affectionately. "It is a characteristic of our race that the women become pregnant easily. It is necessary to...take steps...to limit the size of our families. I did wonder if the fact that you are an off-worlder would create difficulties, but it seems not - the wise women have confirmed that I am to bear your son. I am glad that you are pleased."

"A son..." Kirk whispered wonderingly. "Tavara, will you let Bones look after you? I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you - or the child."

"I will be guided by your doctor friend," Tavara promised. "Husband, will you permit me to form the marriage tie with you? It is very important to me."

"If you wish it, of course. What do you want me to do?"

"Only trust me. I have never linked before..."

"Linked?" Kirk felt a sudden inexplicable fear. "What do you mean?"

"Our minds will touch, we will become one. I touch you...like this..." her fingers brushed his temples "...and reach out to you with my mind."

Kirk looked at her, his eyes bright. That fleeting touch filled him with a strange confusion of emotions. There was fear, yes...but also a thrill of anticipation, longing.

"Come, then," he whispered, drawing her down onto the bed.

As before there was pain, but she fought it down sternly, knowing that if they were physically joined it was easier to form the tie. She shifted position, trying to make herself more comfortable, but searing pain stabbed through her and she reached blindly for his head, knowing that she must link now, before she lost all control and shrieked aloud in her agony. Her fingers found the smooth flesh, pressed deep; her mind reached out, seeking, compelling, demanding an answer.....

.....The pain she had known was nothing, overwhelmed and annihilated by the destructive forces that raged between them. Impossibly, shields snapped into place in Kirk's mind as a demented savage howled its fury at the violation. She was thrown away violently, to lie half stunned on the floor as Kirk screamed in mingled horror, rage and despair. Then, with a low moan of indescribable desolation he scrambled from the bed and reeled drunkenly out of the tent, his expression that of a man who had suddenly looked upon total insanity.

Tavara never knew how long she crouched there. At last she rose, dressed, and made her way slowly to her father's tent.

Malor was there, as she had hoped and she almost fell into his comforting arms.

"Tavara! What has happened?" Tama turned her around and shook her gently. "What is wrong?"

"Tonight...I attempted to form the marriage tie with Kirk," She licked

dry lips, and continued painfully, "He is handfasted to the Vulcan, Spock. When I touched his mind his instinctive shields repelled me. Father, what shall I do? I have violated a true bond."

"You did not know, my daughter," Tama comforted her. "It may be that the shock of your mind touch has restored his memory."

"Don't be afraid," Malor whispered. "Kirk is gentle, and I believe that the Vulcans are a reasonable people - they will both know that it was not your fault." As he spoke he glanced at his father, and a look of guilty understanding passed between them.

"He was happy when I told him I was to bear his child," Tavera wept. "What will become of my son now?"

"I..." Tama sought for inspiration. "Our own warriors often take a wife to ensure an heir. If the Vulcans have retained this custom there should be no difficulty. Kirk told you he had no wife, did he not? Remember who you are, Tavera. As my daughter you are a fit wife for any man."

"Where is your husband?" Malor asked suddenly.

Tavera's eyes widened. "He... fled from me... Seek him out, Malor. He may be in danger, confused... Oh gods, don't let him come to harm because of me!"

"I'll go at once," Malor promised, snatching up his cloak. "Wait here, and don't worry - I'll find him."

Leaving the tent, Malor questioned some of the servants on duty. One man reported that he had seen someone coming from the direction of Kirk's tent, but he had paid little attention; he was sure, though, that it had been a man, and that he had headed out into the desert.

Thankful for the brilliant moonlight, Malor searched the edge of the circle of tents until he found the footprints of a running man heading out into the sand. He followed swiftly, calling as he went, and was soon rewarded by the sight of a pale shape on the ground not far ahead.

It was Kirk, naked, sprawled on the sand. He started violently at Malor's touch and cowered away, his eyes bright with a terror the Remoran was at a loss to understand. If Kirk and the Vulcan were handfasted, united by the very rare true bond, why this fear? The Human's mate would only have to touch him to know that he was not to blame, that he had acted in ignorance. If needs be, he, Malor, would confess what he and Tama had done; and they too had acted in ignorance, believing that only the more common handfasting united the two, for neither would have dreamed of violating a true bond.

Still, Kirk was Human. Perhaps there was some factor, of which the Remoran was unaware, that altered the situation? No matter - the important thing now was to get Kirk to safety.

Abruptly Malor swung the cloak from his shoulders and draped it around Kirk's body before pulling the Human gently to his feet.

"You cannot remain here," he said firmly. "Come with me."

Kirk looked up, an expression almost of relief in his eyes as he responded to the tone of command. "Yes, of course," he murmured vaguely. "But you see, you must tell me what to do," he continued.

Appalled, Malor stared at him blankly. This was not the happy, confident man he had spoken to only a few hours earlier. Could it be that the violation of his bond had affected his reason? Or had the shock revived memories for Kirk that were so terrible they reduced him to this?

Slowly he led Kirk back to his tent, helped him into bed, and gave him a sleeping draught, which the Human swallowed without protest. Malor's experiences in battle warned him that Kirk was deep in shock - perhaps he would be more rational in the morning.

As the days passed the Remorans became increasingly concerned about Kirk. The Human was almost totally withdrawn, speaking only when directly addressed. The servants reported that he barely touched his food, and although he seemed to tolerate their presence he reacted with extreme distress if Tavana approached him. She quickly learned to keep away. He much preferred to be left alone, and after a time Malor arranged that no-one go near him, although a discreet eye was kept on his solitary wanderings near the camp.

What the Remorans did not know was that Tavana's attempted mind touch had indeed awakened Kirk's memory - but only partially. The events of the last few years were still lost to him, and he believed himself to be still in the Captain's power.

That being so, Kirk was terrified. He remembered the Captain's insane, possessively jealous reaction to his innocent relationship with Miramane, and shuddered at the thought of what his master would do when he learned of his marriage to Tavana, and of the coming child. At least her family was powerful enough to protect her... But once back on the Enterprise there would be no escape for him. Every waking moment was torment as he hunted for some way to avert the Vulcan's anger. There was no further submission he could make - the Captain owned him body and soul, and had long since destroyed or corrupted everything he cherished.

And that only increased Kirk's terror, for what punishment was left for the Captain to inflict? He looked back over long years of pain and degradation and shuddered, knowing that the vengeance to come would make the suffering he had already endured pale into insignificance.

He moved unsteadily through a hazy world peopled with unreal phantoms whose curiosity, concern and interest were utterly meaningless. Somehow - he did not know why - they were responsible for his plight, they had tricked him into betraying his cruel master. Until now he had always been able to console himself with the certainty of his innocence, knowing that the Vulcan would accept it in time. Now he had no such comfort - and as he waited, he grew heart sick with fear.

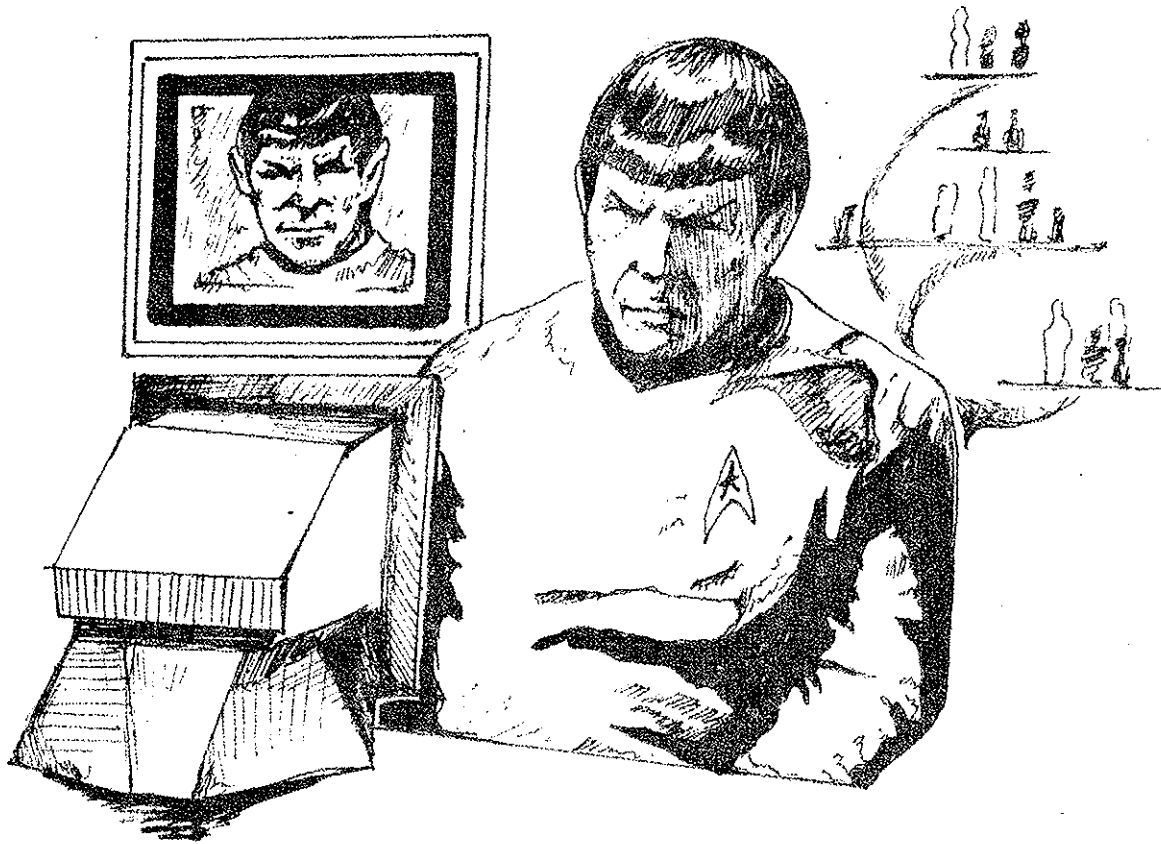
On the Enterprise Spock was in a fever of impatient anxiety. The incomplete link warned him that something was seriously wrong with his bondmate, but he could gain no hint as to the nature of the trouble.

Somehow - he was not sure how - he managed to conceal his anxiety from the crew, and from Selek, whose presence was a complication he had not foreseen - he had expected that he would be taking Chief Lanyo only back to Vanla, then, having retrieved his First Officer, return to his normal duties. But Selek was returning to Vanla to take personal charge of the discussion of a new trade agreement with Chief Lanyo and his council.

Fortunately, Spock could use the excuse of his duties, and the additional difficulties of operating without his First Officer, to avoid much contact with his uncle. The Vulcan might accept that a bond between a half-Vulcan and a Human could not convey any detailed information over a long distance, but it was not a risk Spock was prepared to take. He did inform McCoy - his staunch ally where Kirk's welfare was concerned - then set himself to wait with all the patience he could muster. The talks were dragging on...and on...

Spock found himself contemplating risking a quick rush to Vanla at top speed to find out what was wrong, but he knew that if he did so, Selek would immediately realise that something was wrong - he was still using his quarters on the Enterprise instead of the rooms he was entitled to on Babel, and even at warp eight it would not be possible to do the round trip during the hours that Selek would be fully occupied with the interminable discussions most of the diplomats seemed content to hold. Reluctantly, Spock waited.

At last the talks reached a conclusion that appeared satisfactory to most of the diplomats attending, and the Enterprise was at last free to return to



Vanla.

They were still a few hours out from the planet, and Spock was alone in his quarters, when Uhura relayed an incoming personal message from the Vulcan consulate on Vanla. Spock accepted the call with some curiosity, wondering why he was being called instead of Selek, and was startled when he recognised the face forming on the screen.

"Cousin - I did not expect to see you here," Spock said formally.

"Obviously not. I have been much interested in that bondmate of yours, Spock, and I have uncovered a scandal that will shake Vulcan to its foundations."

"Specify." Spock's voice was as cold as the fear that gripped him. He remembered vividly how Sendak had attempted to terrify Kirk on the day of their bonding, and remembered too how his cousin's political distrust of Humans had been fanned by his resentment that Kirk had taken his place within the family as Sarek's co-heir with Spock.

"I think not, cousin." Sendak smiled maliciously. "You will know in good time, when I make my charges to my father. Kirk has betrayed you, Spock, and disgraced the family...and you, half-breed, knew nothing about it!"

"Sendak, wait - !" It was too late - the younger man had ended transmission.

Without a pause for thought Spock keyed the intercom for Uhura. "Lieutenant, you will accept no calls from Vanla, and you will make none there without my personal permission. Use whatever excuse you like - equipment failure, anything - but there must not be contact between this ship and the planet. Have Dr. McCoy report to my quarters at once." It was fortunate that Sendak's spitefulness had made him want to gloat...

"Yes, Captain."

Spock keyed the intercom again. "Chief Lanyo, this is Captain Spock. May I speak with you privately?"

Something, Charlene Masters decided, was definitely wrong. First Spock had handed her the con, announcing that he intended to beam down to Vanla with Chief Lanyo, taking only Dr. McCoy and the Chief's personal guard; then Uhura had told her that Spock had ordered her to arrange a malfunction in the communications equipment; then Kyle had been dismissed from the transporter room, and Masters herself had been ordered to handle the beamdown, after which no-one was to board or leave the ship until Spock countermanded the order personally.

In fact, for the first time since boarding the Enterprise, Masters found herself a little nervous of the Captain. The realisation that he was an alien had never really struck her before. He had seemed to understand his Human crew so well, and his calm authority in the face of danger had always been an inspiration, but now... Now she saw the Vulcan in him, fully and for the first time, an awareness that went far beyond mere physical differences. Beneath the tightly-leashed control his anger burned, and with all her heart Masters hoped that whatever had aroused that slumbering fury, it was not directed at Kirk.

Gesturing his companions to their places Spock joined them. "Energise!" he commanded abruptly.

The presence of the Paramount Chief convinced Tama it would be better to make no attempt at deception. With a sinking heart he heard the Vulcan's first words.

"Tama, I seek my mate!"

"The Commander is alive, I pledge my word..."

"Fool, I know that!" There was an edge to Spock's voice that made McCoy look at him sharply. "I also know that he has come to harm."

"Not by our wish, Captain." Haltingly, aware of Lanyo's anger and Spock's barely-restrained fury, Tama recounted the details of Kirk's accident, and of his plot to ally himself to Vulcan by the marriage of his daughter to the son of a powerful Vulcan house.

"Married!" Spock interrupted at that, turning his head to stare at the trembling girl. "Come here, woman!"

Obediently Tavara came forward and stood, head lowered, before her husband's bondmate.

"What was your part in this?" the Vulcan demanded harshly.

"I acknowledge my guilt, and declare his innocence." Tavara's voice was low but clear. "I can only plead in mitigation that I did not know he was true-bonded."

"Yet he...agreed to this?" To McCoy's concerned eye Spock seemed dazed by the news.

"Captain, he had only partial memory, flashes of his past. When we told him of things that we knew, he could recall them, but remembered little of himself. He accepted the lies we fed him as he accepted the truth."

"I see. Continue."

"He seemed...content with the marriage. A little uncertain, perhaps, but he was kind and gentle. All was well until I reached for his mind to form the marriage tie with him..."

"You touched his mind? You fool, what have you done? He is..."

"Spock, wait!" McCoy caught Spock's shoulder as he turned. "Think before you act! We've got to talk."

"You...you are right, McCoy." Spock steadied himself with an effort. "But

first. I must hear the end of this. Finish your story, woman!"

Tavara obeyed, describing Kirk's actions that night and his subsequent withdrawal. As she talked Spock listened in silence, but McCoy knew that every nerve in the Vulcan's body was as tense as a drawn wire.

When Tavara ended her tale he drew a deep breath and turned to Lanyo. "I must go to my mate."

"Of course." Lanyo looked thoughtfully at the Remorans. "You will not be disturbed. I have something to say to these disloyal ones."

Leaving the tent Spock and McCoy walked in silence for a few minutes until they reached an open space where there was no risk of being overheard. Halting, McCoy looked at his companion, then pushed Spock down to sit on a boulder.

"Rest there for a minute," he said gruffly. "Now look - there's no use you rushing up to Jim in this state. If you're going to be of any use to him, you must be calm."

"I know." Spock pressed his hands over his eyes, fighting for control. When he spoke again it was with an uncertainty that the doctor had never heard before from the confident Vulcan.

"McCoy...I am afraid. If Jim remembered me he would never have consented to the marriage. Yet he clearly remembers something of his past. The mind touch...what did it awaken in him to send him naked into the desert? What memories has he lived with since?"

"Let's go see him and find out," McCoy suggested. "That is...if you want me to go with you?"

"Please," was all Spock said, but McCoy recognised the appeal in the single word.

Instinct kept McCoy in the background as they stepped through the doorway of Kirk's tent; he would not interfere, but as a doctor he wanted to make his own assessment of the Human's condition.

"Jim?" Spock called. "Jim, where are you?"

There was a movement deep in the shadows and Kirk walked forward, his wide eyes fixed unblinkingly on the Vulcan's face.

"Thank god!" Spock stepped forward, his hands outstretched in greeting, and McCoy witnessed the most horrible sight he had ever seen in his life.

He knew, of course, how the Captain had treated Kirk, and he had seen echoes of that torment in Kirk's reactions in the early days of his freedom. What he had never imagined in his wildest dreams was how it had been for Kirk to live with that horror day after day, month after month.

It was shocking, it was pitiful; it was heartbreaking, and McCoy's stomach churned in revulsion as at Spock's movement Kirk fell prostrate on the floor at the Vulcan's feet.

"I didn't know!" he sobbed, clutching at Spock's boots. "I couldn't remember, and they drugged me... Please, not the sakkana - any punishment but that! Oh, for once be merciful! I swear I didn't know!"

There was no time to think. Spock only knew that the Human must be reassured. He bent down and lifted Kirk to his feet, gazing in sorrow at the terrified face. Kirk's eyes were red and swollen with weeping, and he shivered uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry...say what I can do to be forgiven. I'll do anything...anything you want...only please don't hurt me!"

"Jim..." Spock reached out to touch his bondmate's shoulders. "Jim, do you remember me?"

"I do now," Kirk whispered. "I know that I belong to you."

So that was it! Tavaras's interference, her uninvited intrusion into Kirk's mind, had brought to the surface memories of the one other who had acted so, and Jim thought that he was the Captain.

Spock turned his eyes seeking McCoy's, silently begging, 'Leave us.' Without hesitation McCoy slipped silently out of the tent.

Schooling his voice to gentleness, Spock stretched out an imploring hand. "Jim... Please, Jim. I won't hurt you..."

But Kirk's half-remembering mind saw only a tall figure with a face to be feared; his memory told him that he belonged to this man, who would punish without mercy any disobedience, real or imaginary; who would, he knew, certainly consider his marriage to Tavaras rank treachery. That he had been literally tricked into the marriage would not be considered an excuse. She would die; many of her people would die too, as the first part of his punishment - as their punishment for allowing him to marry Tavaras. And then the next part of his punishment would begin...pain and fear and...

Spock knew instantly that the Human did not believe him, and remembered what Jim had once told him; how the Captain had sometimes pretended gentleness, only for the pleasure of seeing Kirk's despair as he learned yet again that it was a lie.

There was only one thing to do, one way to be ultimately merciful...and it could mean breaking the promise he had once made to his friend, his bondmate. Would Jim - could Jim - ever forgive him for it, for the terror - brief though it should be - that it would bring? Once before he had done this...but then Jim had been semiconscious, nothing worse, and he had known and welcomed him...

He took the few steps that separated him from Kirk quickly, before he could change his mind, his hand reaching out for the meld.

Understanding the implications of the gesture Kirk tried to duck away, to reach one of the hunting spears stacked inside the door, and Spock was conscious of a momentary pleasure that, terrified though he was, he should at least be trying to fight back; but he could not permit the Human the luxury of escape. He moved faster than he would have believed possible and caught Kirk's arm, forcibly halting him.

Kirk froze, his expression a mixture of fear and defiance. Spock raised his free hand, positioning it for the meld.

Resistance!

His reassuring approach was met by the featureless wall of the shield he himself had taught Kirk to raise, and he knew that it could not be breached.

Spock sighed with a mixture of satisfaction and regret. Startled by the 'Captain's' sudden - although probably anticipated - appearance, Kirk's initial reaction had been his usual fearful submission; but within minutes he had begun to fight back, to resist. Those shields had probably snapped up at the first touch of Tavaras's mind; had the contact lasted longer Kirk might well have remembered everything. Yet the changes Spock had wrought had gone so deep that even now, believing that his master had come to claim him, Kirk was able to resist.

For some moments Spock continued to press gently against the wall in Kirk's mind, seeking to breach it with gentle coaxing.

//Jim... Jim, it's Spock. I won't hurt you, Jim. Please, let me in.//
But he knew it was useless.

He had to do something - and quickly - about Kirk's partial amnesia, and a mind link was the simplest, most efficient way of restoring the lost memories.

As he had feared from the moment he had decided to initiate contact, he would have to force entrance, using the bondmate link, and in doing so break

that promise made so long ago.... That the promise had been unnecessary for a long time - for almost as long as it had been made, in fact - mattered little; Jim had never freed him from it.

Spock thought he could understand why. Implicit though Jim's trust in him was, his life had not been one that would encourage him to surrender any safeguards he had. He probably was not even conscious that he regarded the promise as a safeguard; he probably had simply not given it a thought for a long time.

But it still existed.

Still reluctant to force entry, Spock tested the bondmate link. It also stopped short at the mental barrier, but he could feel it, incomplete though it was, pulling at him through that wall.

//Jim...bondmate...please.//

There was no response.

Spock took a deep breath, then without giving himself time to reconsider he claimed his right of entry into his bondmate's mind. There was a brief moment of resistance at the barrier, then, with a soundless implosion, he was in Kirk's mind.

Fear!

//Jim...do not be concerned. It is I, your bondmate...I cannot harm you even if I would, my friend. Jim...remember...remember...//

He felt the errant memories swirling, eddying, then coalescing into a coherent whole.

//Spock?//

//Yes, Jim.// He made to withdraw, but Kirk's mind clutched at his.

//I'm sorry...I thought you were...the Captain.//

//I know.// He began to withdraw again.

//Spock?// The mind touch barely existed now...then snapped.

"Forgive me. I promised you once that I would never enter your mind without your permission. I have broken that promise." Spock turned away from Kirk to stand staring blindly through the open doorway of the tent.

Kirk looked at his back, puzzled by his response. He had almost forgotten that promise, made so long ago to reassure a terrified child; if he thought of it at all, he assumed that Spock, too, had relegated it to the category of 'unnecessary'. Apparently Spock had not, and even though they were bonded, still felt himself bound by it. His own instantaneous lowering of his mental shields at the first touch of Spock's mind had become so instinctive that he had failed to recognise for a long time now that Spock had never taken his right of entry for granted.

As he reached out to touch Spock's face, meaning to initiate contact, a memory made him draw back.

Tavara!

That he had suffered amnesia was no excuse. He had broken the bonding vow, taken another partner without his bondmate's consent. He had not the right to ask for any mental union, much less demand it as he had been about to do. Spock was probably using the 'broken promise' as an excuse to salvage as much as possible of his pride.

"You did what you had to do," Kirk said aloud.

If you truly believe that, why do you not initiate a meld? Spock thought in near despair.

"Possibly," he said in a voice harsh with the effort of speaking calmly, controlling his desperate hunger for the laughing warmth of his bondmate's welcoming mind.

He's never spoken that way before, thought Kirk. Not to me. Does he believe I was merely using him when I bonded with him? He never probed those thoughts I wished to keep hidden...not that there were many. "Spock..." he said, unsure of what he meant to say.

There was no answer. Spock merely waited in silence.

"Spock, I owe you an explanation...about Tavana..."

"Tavana?" A cold hand gripped Spock's heart. The woman. What was she to Kirk?

That I was suffering from amnesia is a reason, not an excuse. They were anxious for me to marry her...and I had no reason to object. I am...her husband...in every sense. I'm sorry."

So Jim has finally overcome his impotence, accepted himself as a fully functional male, and is content with his...wife. I have no valid reason to object; I should be glad for him. And the Family Council cannot object - it is his right to take a secondary wife, and of course I will uphold his choice. He turned to face Kirk.

"I understand." Why was it so difficult to speak normally? He had lost



nothing; theirs had never been a full bonding, and since the woman had no Starfleet training she would be left on Vulcan. He and Jim would continue on the ship as before...

No. Not quite as before, for now some of Jim's thoughts would belong to her. Resolutely, Spock suppressed his rising jealousy. "My...my congratulations Jim."

"There's more, Spock. She...she's pregnant."

Spock was too overwhelmed by his own sense of desolation to see Kirk's lack of enthusiasm over the news. I should be glad! he told himself again. Jim will give Sarek the grandchildren he wants - and it is fortunate that the woman is of vulcanoid stock.

"I am...pleased for you. This will undoubtedly be the first of several." The knife twisted deeper into his heart with each word.

"No," Kirk said.

"No?"

"There...won't be any more."

"But...but why? You know now that sex is nothing to be afraid of."

"Do I?" Kirk's voice was bitter. "Spock, she hated it! I'd forgotten the pain, the humiliation, and I responded to her...and she was willing, the first time, more than willing...until she felt the pain as I entered her. I...I spoke to her father...and he assured me that this was common the first time, that the next time it would be all right. She had said that too - someone must have told her that beforehand - and she came willingly the next night...but it hurt her that time too. I thought I could teach her to enjoy it, and she submitted - she knew her duty - but she hated it, Spock, just as I always hated it... It gave her no pleasure...I tried so many positions, hoping to find one she would find...pleasant. I kept hurting her, Spock, selfishly using her body the way the Captain used mine. I hated myself, but I didn't stop... and she tried to help me...we were sure we would make it work if we tried long enough. And then one night she clearly decided she'd had enough - she pushed me away and refused to come to me again. I didn't insist - because the last time she came it was to attempt to form the marriage tie, and I remembered the Captain, that I belonged to him, not to her... By that time, though, she was pregnant."

Spock swallowed. He had to know. "Do you love her?"

Sadly, Kirk shook his head, then realising that Spock wasn't looking at him, said quietly, "No. They wanted me to marry her, told me it was all arranged...and so I agreed. I like her well enough; she was kind to me, and she tried to be a good wife...but...I can't speak to her, Spock. She's intelligent, you can see that, desperate to learn more than she knows, but she's limited by her culture. There's so much that we know, take for granted, that is foreign to her - and to her people. Maybe that's why I kept trying with her... using sex as a substitute for the conversation I could never have with her - or she with me. And I feel sorry for her...she wanted to escape Vanla...but I don't love her."

Relief flooded Spock's mind. Instantly ashamed of himself, he forced himself to say, "I'm sorry."

Sorry...because your pride, your honour, do not permit you to accept me again...an unfaithful bondmate? "I'm sorry too, Spock. I realise this must have been a shock to you...and I never wanted to hurt you..." And I must spare him the additional strain of telling me to go. "Perhaps...perhaps it would be best...if I were to request a transfer, Captain. Shevas would be glad to have me..."

Transfer, thought Spock dully. Yes, my offence is beyond forgiveness. "If

you feel you must, Jim, I will not try to stop you." And for the first time, with no-one to overhear, he called me 'Captain'. "Even if I were to renew my promise, how could I expect you to trust me again?"

Startled, Kirk stared at him. "How could I not trust you?"

Spock looked up, meeting Kirk's puzzled eyes, his own unhappy. "Isn't that why you want to leave?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't want to leave...but how could you trust me again? By marrying Tavera I broke our bonding vow..."

Spock closed his eyes for a moment. "Jim, you have the right to take a secondary wife."

"With your approval. You were not here."

"Jim, your memory had gone. Since our bonding is incomplete, you could not remember me. You acted in a perfectly logical manner. If you had wanted this, I would never have denied you. But...to recall your memories...I was forced to compel a mind link with you, thus breaking the promise I made to you long ago..."

"Spock!..." So he really meant it. Kirk caught at the Vulcan's arms. "Oh, Spock - to worry so needlessly..." He reached out with his mind.

Spock tried to pull away, punishing himself, denying himself the oh-so-welcome touch of the Human's mind.

Kirk took a deep breath. "Bondmate, I demand my right! Open your mind to me!"

The barrier dropped instantly. Their minds joined, entwined...

//Forgive me.// //There is nothing to forgive.// Question and answer were simultaneous.

//I haven't needed that promise for a long time, my friend. I don't need it now. I trust you.//

//Jim...//

//But Tavera...//

//It is perhaps as well that this has happened. You have a secondary wife who is pregnant. This gives...us...an heir, who would not otherwise have been born. Sarek will be pleased.//

//Really? But will the Family Council approve?//

//If I accept Tavera, so will they.//

Their linked minds fell silent, enjoying the intimacy of the meld.

At last Spock stirred and drew back. "Jim, we must think. Sendak is on Vanla, and he has clearly heard some account of this. He implied that he could disgrace us... So far I have been able to prevent him from contacting Selek, but I cannot do so indefinitely. We must make certain that we are fully protected."

"He could have heard of my marriage," Kirk said slowly. "Tama was proud of it... If Sendak can convince his father that you didn't know about Tavera beforehand, he would be able to accuse me of breaking my bonding vow. And Selek will wonder why you didn't know through the link what I was doing, and denounce me at once."

"I knew something was wrong with you, but not what. I decided it would be safer to say nothing to Selek...if I had, we could have told him the truth, and claimed that since neither of us is fully Vulcan, the link is weaker than normal, hence my inability to help you through it."

"So now he's going to realise that we weren't in contact at all? And he'll certainly expect you to denounce me now?" Kirk thought for a moment. "There might be something we can do, though... Let's have a word with Chief Lanyo - and find out just how badly Tama wants an alliance with our House..."

In the audience hall of the Paramount Chief of Vanla, Ambassador Selek greeted his son with a formality that could not quite conceal his pride. Selek was a dutiful son, a credit to the family; it was a pity that he had this mistrust of outworlders, but he was young - maturity would bring wisdom.

This envy of Spock, for example, was illogical, for his nephew, the oldest male of his generation, had already proved himself a worthy successor to the leadership of the Clan, and his Human mate, although perhaps an unusual choice, was decidedly an asset to the Family.

"Greetings, Father." The two touched in ritual greeting. "It is most urgent that I speak with you privately, before Spock..."

"Wait." Selek's lifted hand silenced him. "It must wait until later. Chief Lanyo is coming."

"But..."

"Later," Selek repeated firmly, and turned to acknowledge the arrival of the Chief.

"Ambassador, you are again welcome to Vanla. Almost a family gathering, is it not? And appropriate that you should be here, on such a significant occasion for both our worlds."

"Significant? I fear I do not understand."

"Ah, but I must let Spock tell you himself." Lanyo turned to Spock and Kirk, who had accompanied him into the hall.

"Spock?" Selek raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"As you know, uncle, James and I have recently been considering our duty to provide our father with an heir; however, it was necessary to select a suitable female as secondary wife."

"We felt that she should be Vulcan," Kirk continued, "because...well... because a Human female would have meant that my children would be fully Human, Spock's, only one quarter Vulcan."

"Indeed," Selek nodded approvingly. "With a Vulcan mother the children will be either one half or three quarters Vulcan."

"Exactly." Spock took up the tale again. "James confided in me, however, that he was...troubled...at the thought of being responsible - even in part - for the welfare of a Vulcan woman."

Spock hesitated, swallowing nervously. This was something that in the world of his birth he would never have dreamed of discussing, but it was permissible here; and to divert suspicion from Jim he could do anything that was required of him.

"He holds our traditions and customs in deep respect," Spock continued. "He has proved it, I think, by his willingness to accept the need for a secondary wife in a male marriage."

"Your bondmate is indeed known for his respect for our ways," Selek nodded. "Continue, Spock."

"When we discussed a possible secondary wife, we recalled Tavara, daughter of Chief Tama of the Remora. We...met her during our last assignment here, and it seemed to us that she would make an ideal wife. She is of Vulcan stock, and understands much of our ways, yet she is also familiar with certain Human attitudes. She is well-born, and has been trained to be a dutiful wife."

"When James was assigned here I requested him to approach Chief Tama on the question of taking Tavarra as secondary wife; it seemed an ideal opportunity, as, if the woman consented and her father was agreeable, she could return to Vulcan with us on the Enterprise to be presented to the Family."

"I approached Chief Tama, as Spock suggested," Kirk went on, obeying a mental nudge from his bondmate. "He was happy to agree, and Tavarra was willing. They made one condition, though. Tama wished to see his daughter married by the customs of Remora before we left for Vulcan. I spoke to Tavarra, pointing out that she'd be marrying both of us. She agreed, but said that it was a point of honour that a woman of her people prove her fertility before she left her tribe. If she went with us to Vulcan, went through our marriage ceremony before the marriage was consummated, and then proved barren, she would bring disgrace to her people. If she was...pregnant by me, she could go with honour."

"James contacted me through our link." Spock took up the story again, "and I gave my consent to his fulfilling the Remoran conditions. The woman is to bear our child, and we consider her our wife. Will you give her welcome, uncle?"

"Of course, Spock. You may present her to me." Selek watched as Chief Lanyo spoke to one of his attendants, who left the hall. His attention was distracted by Sendak, who tugged impatiently at his sleeve. "What is it, my son?"

"Father, this is a pack of lies! I spoke with Spock just before he beamed down to Vanla - I'll swear he didn't have the slightest idea that Kirk had married this woman. I am certain that the Human has broken his vows, and that Spock is trying to shield him."

"That is a serious charge," Selek said sternly, "and you have no basis for it. Look at them - see how Spock regards James? That is not the attitude of a man to a faithless bondmate."

"I'm sure of it, Father," Sendak insisted. "When the Enterprise returned I attempted to contact you in order to lay my charges. My call was deliberately blocked."

"Now I know that you are mistaken. Miss Uhura herself had the courtesy to inform me that there was a fault in the communications system. She would have no reason to lie."

"She obeys Spock's orders, as they all do..."

"Enough! You must forget this suspicion of James, Sendak. He is Spock's chosen mate, and he has never conducted himself with anything but the utmost propriety, difficult though it must be for him at times. Now be silent - here comes the woman."

Accompanied by her maid, Tavarra entered the hall and took her place between Kirk and Spock. Each took one of her hands, and drew her to face Selek.

"Selek, as head of the Clan we present to you our secondary wife Tavarra, daughter of Tama," Spock said formally.

"You are welcome, child."

"Thank you, my lord." The woman clutched tightly at Kirk's hand. "It is my hope that the son I bear will bring honour to my new family."

"Well said," Selek approved. "You will, of course, take part in our customary ceremony of second marriage, but from this day the protection of Vulcan, and of our House, is yours."

"If you will forgive me..." McCoy, who had been hovering in the background, stepped forward, nodding a greeting to Selek. "I think the Lady Tavarra should rest now. Her condition..." He paused significantly.

"Is there any problem, Doctor?" Selek looked concerned.

"Not really, sir, but in view of the...er...differences between the Lady and her husband, I am anxious that she should avoid stress."

"Of course, Doctor. Perhaps you should take her to the Enterprise. I understand we leave in a few hours, Spock?"

"As soon as you have completed your talks with Chief Lanyo, uncle."

"Then I will join you on the ship. I think we are almost in agreement, Chief?"

"Indeed. We merely need a formal agreement of the treaty. Farewell, Captain Spock, Commander Kirk. Return with speed to Vanla."

"Thank you, Chief." Spock inclined his head, then joined Kirk, McCoy and Tavera. He opened his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise - four to beam up, Mr. Kyle."

On the Enterprise Tavera explored her quarters with interest. She had been given a comfortable cabin, with one adjoining it for the two servants she had brought with her. The women had already spent several hours sorting through the luggage that had been waiting, and she had found that all her personal possessions, all her clothes and trinkets, were here. Nothing had been forgotten.

It had quickly become clear that this room was intended for her alone. The bed was only wide enough for one, and when all her things were in place there was no room for even the minimal living essentials for anyone else.

She had dismissed her women some time ago, feeling the need to be alone. Kirk had not been near her since they beamed up to the ship, and despite her air of confidence, Tavera felt apprehensive at the thought of facing her husband.

Her...husbands. They had made that very clear. By some custom of the long-forgotten mother planet she was now wife to both, and she was miserably certain that she had only exchanged one undesired future for another that would be even worse.

There had been little time for explanations. Chief Lanyo had instructed Tama, Malor Tavera that Spock was to be obeyed without question. The Vulcan, in turn, had said only that having forfeited their honour by their deception of Kirk, their only hope for safety lay in endorsing the story he would tell.

From the moment she had touched Kirk's mind Tavera had known of her guilt in violating a true bond. It was fitting that there should be punishment, and the only possible reparation she could make lay in obedience. At least her father and brother were safe...and as for herself, she could not believe that Kirk would allow any actual harm to come to her, or to the child she carried.

The Vulcan, though, was an unknown quantity. How would he react to the woman who had attempted to take his mate? Would he be angry, jealous...or would he want her for himself? He had, he remembered, acknowledged the child... She thought of the pain of the nights with Kirk, and shuddered. Two of them...

The door buzzer sounded, and she swallowed nervously, fighting down the cowardly impulse to call for her maids. "Come in."

They entered together, Kirk once more in uniform, and her heart sank as she saw the expression in his eyes when he looked at the Vulcan. Never, even in the first days of their marriage when he had tried to love her, had he looked so at her. And, given that soul-deep devotion in the hazel eyes, Tavera wondered if Kirk would make any attempt to defend her from his mate's anger. With the courage of her warrior ancestors, Tavera drew herself up and waited to hear what her fate was to be.

Spock sensed her nervousness, and her courage, and his eyes softened. Tavara could not know, of course, that her deception had solved a difficult problem for him; he was grateful for that, and he thought that she would be a worthy mother to their son.

"I trust you are comfortable here?" Deliberately, Spock kept his voice gentle. It was necessary that she continue to play the role of secondary wife, but if she could be convinced to do so willingly, so much the better.

"Thank you, my lord - you are most gracious," Tavara answered nervously.

"Shall we all sit down?" Spock waited until they were all seated before continuing. "Tavara, will you tell us why you practised this deception? Wait - " he raised his hand as she opened her mouth to reply " - I believe that you did not know that Jim was my bonded mate. Now that we have... explained you to the satisfaction of my family, we can forget any penalties appropriate to the violation of a bond. I simply wish to know why you took advantage of Jim's amnesia to trap him into a marriage you must have known he would never have agreed to otherwise."

Tavara looked from one to the other. They did not seem angry...and it was her duty as a wife to speak the truth to them. Kirk would understand, she was sure, and she was beginning to think that Spock might, too.

"I have known for some time that I must marry," she began, "and I knew that it must be outside my own tribe. Among the Remorans women are considered equals, but it is not so with the other tribes. I have been accustomed to considerable freedom of action and thought - I did not wish to become the docile pet of a husband who would have no sympathy with my...dreams."

"I can understand that." Kirk smiled encouragingly. "Please go on."

"I longed to paint," she continued earnestly, "but it is not considered... fitting...for a woman of Vanla. Oh, my people appreciate beauty, but it is not considered fitting for a warrior - or a woman - to concern herself with the creation of it. My father understood and sympathised, but for the benefit of my tribe I had to marry. It seemed to me that an outworlder might...understand. I have heard that among the people of the Federation women are permitted a life and a career of their own, even though they be wives.

"When Kirk came among us he was accepted as a fellow warrior by my people. I knew that I would be permitted to marry him. I liked him well, and I felt that he liked me...but there was nothing more, until the accident that robbed him of his memory.

"I pointed out to my father the advantages to be gained if a daughter of the Remora married into one of the great families of Vulcan. He agreed to help me. Our own doctors tended him, for we feared the Vulcan Healer would be able to restore his memory before he was bound to me. Then we...we used our skills to cloud his mind and persuade him that the marriage was his own wish."

"And because I'd been thinking about the problems of taking a secondary wife, I was subconsciously ready to accept what I was told," Kirk mused. "I remembered our bonding, Spock, when I thought I had been through a betrothal ceremony."

"Yes, we used the memories you did have to reinforce your belief," Tavara continued. "Now I am to bear your child, Kirk. What...what will you do with us?"

"Spock?" Kirk glanced at his bondmate. "What on earth are we going to do with her?"

The Vulcan permitted himself a brief smile. "Having acquired a suitable secondary wife, it would not be logical to lose her. Tavara, we have acknowledged you as the secondary wife in our bonding - you will continue to act the part. You will live on Vulcan in our father's house, and our mother will teach you all you need to know to bring up our child in the Vulcan way. Rest

assured, you will be given all the honour to which your rank entitles you, and the child will be our acknowledged heir. Our parents must be told the truth, for reasons I will not explain, but for those same reasons they will welcome you as a daughter of the House.

"One thing you must know and accept, however. Jim is my sole mate, and I, his. You will be our wife in name only."

"You...do not intend to punish me?" Tavara asked in disbelief.

"Had harm come to Jim you would indeed have been punished," Spock said sternly, "but as he is safe, it would serve no useful purpose."

"I do know why you did it, Tavara, and I can't blame you," Kirk said softly. "I deeply regret, however..." He paused and coloured deeply. "I know that I...hurt you...and I can't forgive myself for that."

"It was not your fault," Tavara assured him. "You were gentle, patient..."

"Forgive me, I do not wish to speak of it, except to say that it will not happen again, and that...I'm sorry." He paused for a moment, then continued, "As it is, you have a life to make on Vulcan that cannot include me. Do you remember when we talked about your painting? You told me how much it meant to you, and that the only thing you could look forward to was using your gift to design embroideries. Married to us, you'll be free to paint, if you wish. T'Pau will help you - she is an artist herself."

"We will not interfere in your life," Spock told her, "except to ensure that our child is raised within the Traditions of our House."

"I promise that," Tavara assured him. "I...I will be a good mother, I think."

"I'm sure you will be," Kirk smiled.

"Then you agree to our bargain?" Spock asked.

"Gladly. You have both been...generous. I do not understand all your reasons, but I will be a loyal wife in all you ask of me."

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances. "Then it is settled," the Vulcan said with satisfaction.

Uhura handed the communications console over to her relief and hurried into the turbolift. There was no time to detour by her cabin - conscious that she was already late she went directly to the botany lab. The door slid open at her approach, and she stepped into the freshness of the 'garden', smiling apologetically at the man who was waiting for her there.

"Sorry I'm late, Dave," she said, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. "Palmer was held up in auxiliary; I've only just managed to get away. Do you mind if we stop by my cabin first? I'd like to freshen up."

The tall crewman shook his head ruefully. "I'm going to have to break our date, Uhura. Charlene wants to run a full comparison check on the warp engines, and the Captain's given the go-ahead."

The lovely face fell in disappointment. "How long will it take?"

"At least two hours - probably not more than three. But it sure messes up the evening."

"Perhaps not." Uhura smiled invitingly. "Why don't you come to my cabin when you've finished; we can eat there, and have the rest of the evening to ourselves."

"You've got a deal. Now I really must dash, Uhura - the sooner we get started, the sooner we'll be finished."

"Uh-huh. See you later, Dave."

The door closed behind the engineer, and Uhura turned back into the garden, deciding to stay for a little while and enjoy the tranquillity. She had only taken a few steps, however, when she became aware that she was not alone, and looked round sharply.

"Who's there?"

"I'm sorry, Uhura." Jim Kirk stepped into view. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop - I was busy, and didn't realise anyone had come in. I..."

"Don't worry about it, Jim," Uhura said easily. "That's the trouble with this ship - you're always falling over somebody. What are you doing?"

"Come and have a look." He seemed eager to show her - or perhaps he was only eager to change the subject. "I think I'm going to have some success with this experiment."

She followed him to where a workbench held trays of tiny seedlings; he had been transplanting some of them into individual pots.

"Vulcan desert plants," he explained. "I collected the seeds last time I was home, and I've succeeded in germinating some of them. Unfortunately I can't identify all of them yet, but I do know I've got some Survival Plants. Until now they've never grown off-planet, but if I can adapt them to different conditions, and still retain their basic properties, they'll be useful on desert worlds."

He lifted down a slightly larger pot, and held it out to her shyly. "I wonder if you'd like this one? It's faster-growing than the others, and the flowers are beautiful, very sweet-scented."

"Thank you, Jim. I love flowers."

"I know."

Somehow, Uhura was certain that he wanted to say more, but when he remained silent she smiled at him.

"Well, I suppose I'd better..."

"Don't go, Uhura. I..."

"Yes, Jim?"

"I'd...like to talk to you, if I may. You're the only person I can ask, but...I'm not sure...I don't want to pry into your life..." He paused, gazing at her awkwardly, hope, confusion and pain mirrored in his expressive eyes.

"I don't think you could pry if you tried," Uhura said gently. "Tell you what, Jim. Ask any questions you like. I don't promise to answer, but I do promise I won't be offended."

"Thanks, Uhura." Kirk offered her a shadow of his winning smile. "It's just... I don't quite know where to start." Colouring, he looked at her helplessly.

"Try the beginning."

"You and Kyle... Are you...? I mean..."

"We're friends - and yes, we're lovers too." Uhura sensed what he was trying to ask, and answered calmly.

"Do you...intend to marry him?"

"I don't think so." Kirk was feeling his way into something that was desperately important, something that he needed to talk about, Uhura was sure, and his hesitant questions filled her with sympathy for the shyness that forbade him to ask directly. "I'm very fond of Dave, I even love him in a way, but right now I don't want to marry him, and I don't think he wants to marry me. We enjoy each other's company, we can each give the other something, but more than that... No, we're not right for each other."

"Is it...good for you?" Kirk's voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "Do you ever feel that...he's just...using you?"

"Good lord, no!" Uhura was startled into laughter. "It's very good between us - loving, and gentle, and fun."

"Yet you don't feel the need for total commitment?"

"There are many kinds of love, Jim - that's one of the first things my parents taught me. They had one kind of love; they married at seventeen and loved each other exclusively until the day my father died. Dave and I share another kind of love. We don't want to make our lives together, but I'll remember him fondly as long as I live."

Kirk stared at her in confusion. "I don't understand. I've seen you, and some of the other women... It must be my fault."

"Jim, do you want to tell me? I'd like to help, but I don't know what's troubling you."

"It's...well...personal relationships, Uhura. I'm not talking about my... my bondmate. That's marvellous, and I'm very happy - but in other ways...everything I try seems to go wrong."



"For example?"

"I want to remain faithful to my vows, and everyone on the ship knows I'm bonded, but I still get...offers. I've refused them all - I think without hurting anyone's feelings - but why do they do it, Uhura?"

"Looked in a mirror lately, Jim? You're a very attractive man, and women are curious creatures. That touch-me-not attitude of yours is a real challenge to us."

At his somewhat startled look, Uhura chuckled. "Oh yes, I've wondered too! It's just Human nature, Jim; if you see something you want, you find out if it's available. You can't blame them for trying. I'm sure most of them take no for an answer."

"That's true."

Kirk paused, wondering how to ask the next question. He decided to bend the truth slightly. Spock had suggested that they did not discuss Tavera with the crew, since the Vulcan secondary marriage was not practised among Humans, and in any case on their shared world personal relationships were not mentioned outside the family.

"Before I was bonded," Kirk continued, "I...I had a girl, and we were lovers. I thought there were no problems, then I found out that every time we made love, I hurt her. She'd said nothing, and I was...horrified to discover that I'd caused her such pain."

"Nasty for you," Uhura commented. "But Jim - it happens sometimes. If she'd felt it was your fault she'd have found a way to let you know, believe me. If a woman wants to hide it, there's no way a man can tell. If it helps any...all I can say is that for me, and I think for most women, sex is a sharing of ourselves with a man we are attracted to, someone we like and respect. Your girl must have felt like that, or she wouldn't have been willing. It's nothing to be ashamed of or to apologise for, you know. Some people get more out of it than others, but the only crime is to act selfishly. If you do your best to give your partner pleasure, that's all anyone can ask."

"Thank you, Uhura." Kirk smiled at her in gratitude. "You've cleared my mind of quite a few problems tonight."

"Any time, Jim." Then, sensing that she had said enough, she flashed him a teasing grin. "I'd better go and get ready for Dave - he'll need some consolation for his extra duty."

"Goodnight, Uhura."

Kirk watched her leave, then turned back to his plants, his mind slightly more at ease. 'The only crime is to act selfishly', Uhura had said, and even his ruthless conscience could not convict him on those grounds. Thinking back he could see at last that so many of the people he had felt guilty for hurting had not come to harm through any fault of his.

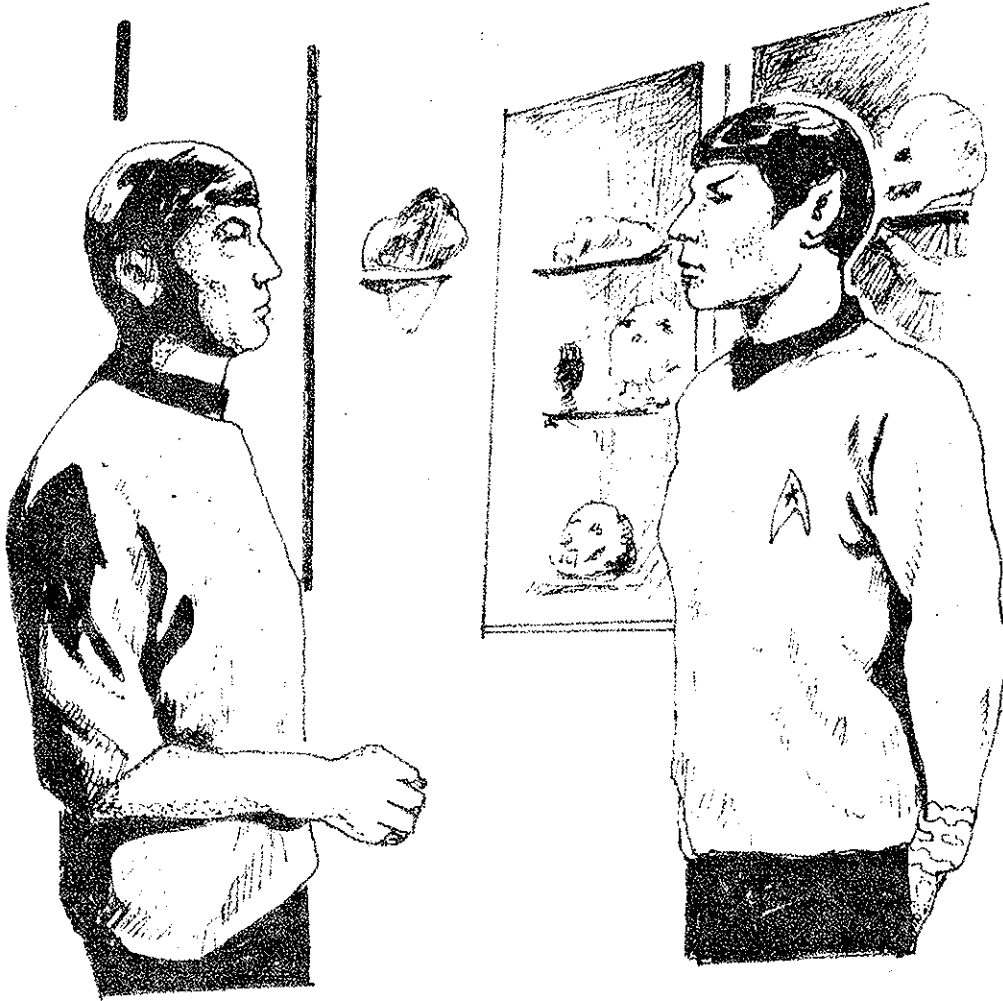
Miramanee had followed the customs of her people, for the priestess belonged to the god; her father's violence, and the Captain's insane anger, had caused her injuries; Kirk had made what amends he could.

Karen Gallard had chosen the life she wanted, the life she had been raised to expect. Perhaps she thought sometimes of the young Starfleet officer who had offered her another way, but the choice had been there.

Marlena Moreau had fallen in love with a man who could not return her feelings. Such things happened every day, and he had never deceived her, or given her cause for false hope.

Tavera...Tavera had gambled to avoid a future she did not want. And...she did not seem too unhappy with the result.

Kirk was smiling as he finished with his plants and went to clean up. There



was only one person in the galaxy to whom he had any willing commitment - and he would keep faith with Spock. Leaving the lab he hurried in search of his bondmate.

Spock was in McCoy's office, having gone down to sickbay in response to a request from the doctor. He had been delayed by Charlene Masters, who had consulted him about a test she wished to run on the warp engines; having authorised her to do so, he had then gone directly to sickbay.

"Is something wrong, doctor?" Spock noted the concerned look on McCoy's face, as he had earlier heard it in the filtered voice over the intercom.

"Not wrong, exactly - but it's not right either." McCoy gestured to the chair in front of the desk, and as Spock sat, crossed to it himself and picked up a tape. Spock noted the coloured flash on it that denoted vital information within.

"Jim? Have there been any ill effects?"

"No, not Jim - yet. This tape concerns Tavana."

"Is she ill?"

"She's perfectly healthy. However, hers will not be an easy pregnancy, and the birth will have to be by surgical intervention before she comes to term. If she were to go into labour, we might not be able to save her - or the child."

"What exactly is wrong?"

"A malformed genital system. She must have suffered considerable discomfort, if not actual pain, during intercourse..."

"She did. Jim told me. He thought that if he persevered, was gentle, he could find a way of giving her pleasure."

McCoy shook his head. "Impossible. And even on an advanced planet the condition could only have been corrected by a massive operation - however, it would certainly have been identified, and she would have been warned to remain single. As it is... Well, as it is, she's in the best possible place. Her life will not be at risk any more."

"Does Jim know?"

"No. I'd like you to tell him, using a mind link. That way he'll know I'm telling the truth, not just trying to make him feel better about it. Show him the tape if you think it'll help. If I know Jim, he'll feel guilty about endangering her life."

"Yes, he will. He already feels guilty about causing her pain."

"He'll know that wasn't his fault either. I suspect she didn't let him know just how bad it was. How could he know she had an internal malformation? But if I tell him so, he'll suspect I'm trying to let him down lightly. Make sure he understands that by marrying her, getting her off her own primitive world, he has actually saved her life. It might make him feel happier about the whole thing."

"It might, but you know Jim." Spock rose to his feet.

"Uh-huh. Stubborn - like a certain Vulcan I know. Once he gets an idea into his head it's almost impossible to shift. You'll talk to him, then?" McCoy handed him the tape.

"Tonight," Spock promised, turning towards the door.

Kirk and Spock finally ran each other to earth in the rec room, each having decided to go for a meal. They discussed ship's business as they ate, breaking off occasionally to greet the officers who came and went around them.

When they had finished they walked back along the corridors together. Spock paused at his door.

"Coming in?"

"Yes, please." The door closed behind them, and Kirk glanced round. "Music or chess?"

"Neither, tonight, I want to talk to you."

"Oh?" Kirk sat, accepting the glass of wine Spock handed him. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"I hope not."

Quietly, Spock related what McCoy had told him, playing the tape in confirmation. Kirk listened in silence, his head bowed in thought.

Switching off the viewer Spock crossed behind Kirk's chair, reaching out to brush the Human's temples with his fingertips. At once Kirk lowered his barriers.

//McCoy was most emphatic that there was no way you could have known, Jim. Whoever she married would have encountered the same problem - and a man of her own people could well have caused actual injury.//

Kirk's mind acknowledged the truth. //Yes, I can see that. And...she and the child will be safe with us - if she'd given birth on Vanla, if would have killed her.//

//So McCoy said.// Spock couldn't hide his surprise. //But I did not expect...//

//You didn't expect me to take it so...logically? I've learned a few things today, Spock. The most important is...it's not always my fault if something goes wrong. Any problems Tavera has she brought on herself, but I think she'll make a good life. At least she'll live to try.//

Slowly, Spock broke the link. He was curiously reluctant to make the suggestion he had in mind, but he felt he owed it to Kirk. He did not, however, trust himself to make it through the link.

"Jim...since you have...accepted that, you should also know that McCoy mentioned the possibility of surgery to enable Tavera to live a normal married life. You and she might care to...consider it..."

"No way!" Kirk shook his head emphatically. "We have an heir. Spock, and that's all the Family have a right to expect from us. As for anything else... I don't love Tavera, and she's not in love with me."

"But..."

"Listen to me, Spock." Kirk reached back to cover Spock's hand with his own. "Before Tavera attempted to form the marriage tie - when I had no memory, and believed I'd married her because I wanted to - I sometimes used to wonder why I'd done it. She did her best to be a good wife in all ways, but...I simply didn't want her around. I used to think that I'd have to share a room or a bed with her for the rest of my life...and my heart sank."

"But Jim..." Spock was puzzled. "You've shared a room - and a bed - with me without complaint."

"I happen to love you," Kirk told him flatly. "And besides, you have one ...no, two advantages as a room mate, Spock."

"Oh?" Spock recognised the devilish twinkle in his friend's eye and deliberately walked into the trap. "And what might they be?"

"You don't fidget in bed," Kirk assured his bondmate solemnly. "And... you don't snore."

UHURA'S LOG

Wonder what made Jim Kirk open up like that tonight? He's never talked about himself before except in very general terms. Wish he hadn't sprung his questions on me like that, though - now that I've had time to think it over, I'm sure there was more he wanted to ask.

Funny...I sort of got into the habit of taking him for granted. He's the First Officer, calm, efficient and completely dedicated to Starfleet. His authority has never been questioned on this ship - he's respected by every man and woman on board.

And yet...although I've speculated about him from time to time, I've never seriously considered him as a lover - perhaps I've been influenced by the fact that he's never shown response to any of the women who've approached him. He's young, attractive, sweet-natured, yet he just doesn't seem to want to know.

For a while I did wonder if he preferred men, but when we heard he was married to a Vulcan - a relative of the Captain's - I understood why he was so unresponsive. He's the faithful type to begin with, and having been accepted by a Vulcan family, he's adopted their views on total fidelity.

Still, I wondered why he'd chosen a Vulcan. Such emotional control can't come easily to a Human. Now, I think I know.

That stupid bitch must have hurt him really badly. Wonder if she was unfaithful? If so, he'd take it hard... A Vulcan woman probably seemed a more loyal partner.

He must be very inexperienced though if he can't realise that it's possible to enjoy a love affair without the need for total commitment. He was so careful not to offend me, but I'm sure it shocked him that Dave Kyle and I enjoy being together without the need for marriage. Oh, one day I'll meet someone, and I'll be as faithful to my vows as Jim is to his, but until then I see nothing wrong in enjoying myself as long as my partner and I both accept the relationship for what it is and remain faithful for its duration.

Jim is different, and it seems to be right for him. I respect his views, and if I have any fantasies about how he'd be as a lover, I'll keep them to myself. Sure, I'm tempted by him...but I respect him too much to test his fidelity just to satisfy my curiosity.

His wife is a lucky woman - wonder if she appreciates just how lucky she is?

THE HOMECOMING

The return to Vulcan was a homecoming none of them would ever forget. T'Pol, having heard the story from her sons and having asked a few pertinent questions, welcomed T'Pol wholeheartedly and at once began discussing with her the preparations for the coming child. Although Kirk's son, and so a Human/Vulcan hybrid like Spock, the intricacies of Vulcan marriage customs decreed that he would be considered Spock's child too, thus doubly ensuring that Sarek's line would continue for another generation - a most satisfactory conclusion. It was wrong of T'Pol to have tricked Kirk into marriage, of course, but as no harm seemed to have been done, and as both her sons seemed perfectly happy with the arrangement, T'Pol was prepared to forgive her.

There was also the fact that T'Pol removed any pressure on Kirk or Spock to take a secondary wife. Not that Selek could have insisted, of course. - in a male bonding there was not the same need for a secondary wife - but the Family Council would certainly have expected them to produce an heir one day; now that they had, everyone would be satisfied.

Another Vulcan/Human child to raise, T'Pol thought as she prepared to retire that night. But this time... This time, with all that she had learned from Kirk, with his guidance and McCoy's, with Spock's own experience, they would avoid the mistakes that had warped...the Other.

Was it partly her fault that he had developed as he had? Regretfully, T'Pol admitted that she and Sarek must share some of the blame. Yet...she had acted in the only way she knew. She had lived with Amanda too short a time to learn much about Humans and their emotions, and so Amanda's son had suffered for that ignorance. This child, she vowed, would be loved, cherished...and he would know it.

T'Pol had arrived on Vulcan prepared for the disapproval, if not the outright hostility, of her mother-in-law. She watched the affection with which T'Pol greeted Kirk, and what little hope she had drained away. Any mother must resent the woman who had tricked a much-loved son into marriage, and when that deception also threatened the happiness of her older son... T'Pol shivered in apprehension.

To her surprise, T'Pol uttered no word of censure. Instead, she greeted the Vulcan woman as a daughter of the House, and at once bore her off to show her the accomodation she had arranged.

T'Pol learned that she was to have her own suite of rooms - as a secondary wife, it was not fitting that she use the quarters Spock shared with Kirk. Servants would be assigned to help her women, and in all ways she would be the mistress of her own home. Even the nursery was to be left in her charge, although T'Pol told her frankly that it was Kirk's wish, and Spock's, that she and Sarek oversee the upbringing of their son in their absence. T'Pol bowed her head in assent, knowing that her husbands had decreed it, not intending any slight to her; and, she admitted honestly, she would be grateful for T'Pol's help - she had little experience with children, and she certainly did not know how to raise a son in the Vulcan tradition.

Advised by Kirk, T'Pol also showed T'Pol her studio, and invited her to share it. Shyly, the younger woman confided her own dreams, and T'Pol encouraged her, explaining that although many women, like T'Kara, were content to

devote themselves to their homes and families, she herself was proof that they were not denied a career. Since her husbands were agreeable, Tavara would be permitted to try what she could do, and T'Pau expressed herself willing to help. As the two quickly became engrossed in plans and arrangements, Tavara realised with some surprise that this once-feared mother-in-law had turned out to be a friend.

Sarek...Sarek was hard put to it to hide his elation. He welcomed Tavara formally as a daughter, and expressed his satisfaction at the imminent arrival of a grandson. Thereafter he said little, leaving the talk to the women and to his sons, but it was clear to them all that he was pleased.

When T'Pau and Tavara withdrew, he listened to the full story of the marriage, looking from Spock to Kirk with almost the air of a sparrow who has just hatched an eagle, as though wondering what his two unpredictable sons would do next. Having heard, he grunted a gruff but sincere enquiry as to Kirk's recovery, then withdrew for his period of meditation;

It was not by chance that before settling down to contemplation, Sarek found himself standing at the window of his room watching his sons as they walked in the garden. Spock's hand rested on Kirk's shoulder, and the Human was smiling up at him as he spoke. Sarek was too far away to hear what he was saying, but the Human's soft laughter reached his ears.

With some surprise, Sarek found himself smiling in sympathy, but - being alone - he saw no reason to hide his enjoyment. Really, this astonishing younger son had enriched his life almost beyond recognition!

Then there was Spock. Sarek gazed proudly at the tall figure. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that this was not, in fact, his own son. The younger man had offered him willingly a respectful affection at which the Other would simply have sneered; he was a loyal, obedient, dutiful son of whom a man could be proud - and he had given Sarek a father's place in his life.

Yes, he owed Spock much. His own son's shame had been hidden; he had a worthy successor to carry on his name; a much-loved younger son to bring laughter into his life; and now a daughter who would bear a healthy child for the family.

For a moment he wondered what Amanda would have thought, and realised with some sadness that he would never know; but in another universe another Amanda had been mother to the man who walked in the garden...and from the depths of his heart he thanked her.

Slowly, Sarek raised his hand in blessing. "Live long, love long, my sons," he whispered softly.

For Kirk and Spock, those few days on Vulcan were among the happiest either had ever known. They had friends there now, and a place to which they were welcomed eagerly. One day, perhaps, they would make their home on the desert planet, but that day was far off - yet it was pleasant to know that they would be welcomed.

It was a quiet, peaceful time spent with family and friends; occasionally they would meet some of the crew, for the Enterprise was in orbit to allow her officers a short leave at the Starbase, but for the most part their companions were Vulcans.

One morning Spock received a message from Commodore Decker, asking him to visit the Starbase; it was a routine matter concerning a few minor repairs to the Enterprise - there was no need for Kirk to accompany him.

Spock waited only long enough to pay their daily formal visit to Tavara - Kirk never saw her alone if he could help it - to satisfy themselves that she was settling in. Although their meetings were friendly enough, Spock deliberately maintained a slight degree of formality, reminding her that neither he nor Kirk had any personal claim on her - or she on them; but at the same time

reassuring her that she was free, within the limits of their bargain, to make her own life.

The visit over, Kirk walked with Spock to the aircar, idly discussing his plans for the day; he stood waiting until the car lifted off, then turned back towards the house.

Spock returned in the late afternoon. He spent a few minutes in his room, then left in search of his bondmate.

Kirk was in the greenhouse he had designed for T'Pol to help her raise the alien seeds he sent her during his travels. He glanced up as Spock came in, brushing the hair back out of his eyes as he did so.

"Hi, Spock. You're later than I expected. I'll be with you in a moment - I just want to finish this."

He transplanted the last few seedlings, arranged the pots on a tray, and placed them in one of the environmental units he had designed, carefully adjusting the humidity.

"There, that should do it," he said cheerfully, dusting his hands. "How did you get on at the base?"

"As I expected - it was simply to sign a few authorisations. Hold still - you have a smear of dirt on your face." Spock gently removed the offending mark before continuing. "However, we are both required at the Base tonight. We are to dine with Commodore Decker and Admiral Senter. There is not much time to spare - I have already laid out your uniform for you."

"Thanks, Spock."

They left the greenhouse together, and went back into the house towards their quarters.

"I'm not too keen on these social occasions," Kirk said suddenly, "but I suppose you couldn't refuse. I won't be long, Spock - give me ten minutes to shower and change."

They parted, and Spock went into his own room to prepare. Dressed, he paced nervously, wondering when and how the reaction would come. How long would it take Kirk to notice...?

When it came it was through the bond-link, a sudden surge of mingled bewilderment and fear. He sensed recognition, apprehension...and a sudden, violently determined denial.

Spock was already facing the door when Kirk burst into the room. The Human was only half dressed, carrying his shirt; he was pale, and the hazel eyes were wide.

"Spock! This... What does it mean?" He held out the shirt he was carrying - Starfleet gold, bearing the gleaming braid of a Captain.

"You... We have been promoted, Jim."

Kirk started as he saw that Spock was wearing the additional braid of a Commodore.

"Decker informed me this morning," the Vulcan continued. "He wanted to announce it tonight, but I persuaded him to let me tell you privately."

"And you agreed?" Kirk's eyes were dark with pain. "Why did you...spring it on me like this?"

"Jim, I had to know how you really felt - if you had changed your mind about accepting command. You might have felt it your duty to refuse out of loyalty to me. If you wish this, I will not stand in your way. I had to be sure."

"Well, now you know." Kirk hurled the shirt across the room and clenched

his fists, his eyes glaring defiance. "I don't want it. I'm not a fit Captain, and I never will be. I need you too much." His eyes softened, and he reached out, gripping Spock's arms. "I'll refuse... and so can you. They won't let us stay together..."

"They will not permit it in any case, Jim. Starfleet will not accept a refusal of this promotion. Last time, your youth persuaded the Admiralty that slightly more experience as First Officer would be beneficial, but this time it is an order."

"Did Decker tell you..." Kirk's voice shook. With an effort he steadied it and continued. "Did he tell you where we were to be assigned?"

"I am to continue in command of the Enterprise. Your assignment is not yet settled, but you will be given your own command."

"No!" Kirk sank down on Spock's bed. "To be parted from you...not to see you every day... No! Oh, no! Spock, I can't cope with that. Perhaps... perhaps I can appeal on medical and psychiatric grounds, make them believe I'm not fit for a Captaincy..."

"With McCoy's testimony you will win, but you will have to give a reason. We have fought too long and too hard to keep our secret to reveal it now. Besides, it would serve no purpose; I have been promoted too, remember."

"There must be something we can do."

"Two things. The first - we can resign."

"Leave Starfleet? I won't let you do that - it's your life."

"You are my life, Jim."

Kirk coloured and bowed his head in assent, knowing it was true. "And the other thing?"

"We can appeal, not against the promotions, but against your posting. As Commodore, I require a Captain as First Officer. You could remain on the Enterprise."

Kirk shook his head dejectedly. "You know Starfleet's policy, Spock. A new Captain is always transferred. It's supposed to make it easier for him if he has a completely new crew."

"If you are agreeable, Jim, we can appeal quoting Starfleet Regulation 488J, Subsection D."

Kirk looked puzzled for a moment, then his face cleared. "The marriage regulations for non-Human races in Starfleet," he said slowly.

"Indeed."

"Specifically, the Regulations covering Vulcan bondmates. How does it go? 'A Vulcan bonding formally registered with Starfleet Command ensures the bondmates a permanent dependency posting.' Of course! That's it!" Kirk jumped up, his eyes glowing. "All we have to do is register our bonding, and..."

"Jim, think for a moment." Spock reached out and took his bondmate's hands. "Do you realise what it would mean? All Starfleet, our crew, all our friends, would know of it. They would assume that you sleep with me."

"But I don't," Kirk said, surprised at the harshness of Spock's tone.

"Do you think anyone would believe that? And remember how dangerous it would be if anyone did. Until now you have only had to play your part on Vulcan - if we attempt this it will be a full-time deception. Can you imagine facing, say, Gary Mitchell, or Commodore Devlin, knowing what they are thinking?"

"I see what you mean." Kirk bit his lip. "But you know, I don't think it'll make all that much difference. As long as I have you, everyone else can think what they like. And I'm sure it'll only be a nine-days'-wonder. I'll survive. After all, it's not that unusual, even on the Enterprise. Two of the Security

Guards requested and received a dependency posting a few months ago, and no-one thinks any the worse of them for it - in fact, they're two of our top-rated men. Unless..." He hesitated. "Unless you mind, Spock?"

"I do not, but then I have less contact with the crew than you do, Jim."

"Well, in that case..." Kirk smiled. "You know, it's the best protection I'll ever have - not even the most determined suitor will risk making a pass at the Commodore's bondmate." His eyes twinkled wickedly.

"You are certain this is what you want, Jim?"

"It's the only way we can stay together, and in Starfleet." Kirk leaned down and picked up the gold shirt. "Come on, Commodore - let's go and break the glad tidings to Decker and Senter."

Later that night Spock and Kirk left Decker's house on the Starbase, their formal application for dependency posting endorsed and registered. Decker had not quite been able to conceal his surprise, but Senter, if anything, had been pleased - it was possible, Kirk reflected, that as a Vulcan he knew of their bonding already. Formal approval of their application would take a few days, but it was only a formality - Kirk would continue as First Officer of the Enterprise.

Spock had had no doubts but that their request would be approved - the only thing that had made him hesitate to request recognition was Kirk's readiness to face an open declaration. In this universe the few Vulcan officers in Starfleet were so highly valued that everything possible was done to ensure that they could continue to serve, even to making arrangements for their bondmates to serve with them. The only restriction - and that was why they were so few in number - was that both partners must be able to function as part of the crew. Here, T'Pring had trained for the Science Section, but she had rejected her mate before his first pon farr.

In his own universe his parting with T'Pring had been amicable, a result of his discovery of his impotence. Bearing in mind the Captain's nature, and Kirk's information that he had hated the woman for her betrayal, Spock had made enquiries as to her whereabouts; he had been greatly relieved to learn that she was no longer on Vulcan, but was assisting her husband Stonn at a Science Academy outpost far out in a little-explored sector of the galaxy. They were unlikely to have any contact with her, a fact for which Spock was duly grateful.

As they passed the Starbase transporter room, Spock's footsteps slowed, and Kirk glanced at him enquiringly. "What's wrong, Spock?"

"A ghost, Jim. A gentle ghost, that I must lay now for all time. Will you indulge me?"

"Of course. What do you want me to do?"

Spock glanced at the transporter room door. "Wait here for five minutes, then beam up to the Enterprise. Come to the bridge. I will meet you there."

Puzzled, Kirk nodded. "I'll come," he promised.

Spock smiled faintly. "Thank you, Jim."

Kirk waited patiently for the five minutes he had promised, then he in turn entered the transporter room and requested beam-up to the ship.

With only a maintenance crew on board the Enterprise, the lighting had been dimmed in the corridors, but he made his way unerringly to the turbolift and commanded, "Bridge!" The car moved swiftly, and as he waited he pondered the reason for Spock's strange request.

'A ghost that I must lay,' the Vulcan had said; Kirk had laid enough of his own to understand the peace it could bring. Suddenly, he knew the answer, and he smiled tenderly - he would not deny Spock this.

The car stopped and the door slid open, revealing the fully-lit bridge; Spock swung round in the command chair to watch him as he stepped from the lift.

Slowly Kirk walked down the steps, and the Vulcan rose, inclining his head in greeting.

"Captain Kirk," he murmured.

Unable to speak, Kirk sat in the chair and felt the Vulcan take up position at his right shoulder. For a moment, choking back tears, he struggled to speak, then the right words came.

"Status, Mr. Spock?"

"Satisfactory, Captain." The quiet voice held all the joy and love that sang into Kirk's mind over the bond link. He turned and was out of the chair in an instant, his arms reaching out to hold the Vulcan close.

"Did it mean so much?" he whispered.

"Yes." Spock hid his face against Kirk's shoulder. "To see you there, in that chair, as you were meant to be...Captain Kirk."

"You promised me," Kirk said slowly. "You promised me you would make me his equal - and you've done it."

The Vulcan pulled away to gaze down into the eager face. "You did it, Jim," he corrected.

"We did it together. It took both of us. And is your ghost laid now, Spock?"

"He is at peace, and so am I." The dark eyes were tranquil. "Jim, my brother, my bondmate - that which was lost is restored at last."

Kirk smiled and extended his hand in the Vulcan fashion. "Bondmate, attend me. Let's go home," he whispered.

KIRK'S LOG

It has happened - I can scarcely believe it. The shivering, terrified slave of a few years ago is now Captain James Kirk of the Enterprise. Spock has kept the promise he made to me that day - and has given me so much more.

I am not the Captain Kirk he lost - and I know now that Spock does not want me to be - but I am his equal and a worthy bondmate to my beloved brother. Our bonding has been officially registered with Starfleet Command. By the time we return to the Enterprise our crew will know. How will they - especially Uhura - react? I feel shy and happy and proud, all at once - but not ashamed. I love him.

Of course most people will assume that I sleep with him. Let them. With the Captain it was the truth and I'd have hated anyone to know; with Spock it's a lie, and I don't care - in fact, it must be believed if our bonding is to be recognised and we are to stay together. Those whose opinions matter - Sarek, T'Pol, Bones - know the truth, and no-one else's prejudices matter to me. My position and Spock's will shield us from any overt insolence, and our real friends will accept the situation as it appears to be, and will rejoice in our happiness.

We are secure at last. The Family will leave us alone when T'Pol has borne her child - her children, for McCoy is sure she'll have twins. Me, a father! I'd never have sought it, but Spock and I are determined to give our children the happiness we never knew.

I'm grateful to Uhura, more than she'll ever know. My...experiences... of sex had twisted my thinking so that it seemed to me a physical relationship must be selfish. She is a warm, generous, loving woman, much wiser than I in

such things. I still don't want such an affair myself; I have made vows to Spock and I intend to keep them, but I can see how that if two people find joy together it cannot be wrong. Not all those who approached me in the past sought their own selfish pleasure - some may have done, but I realise now that many of them wished to please me too. I will remember that.

The hour grows late, and I must join my family for dinner. My father, my mother; the mother of my - of our - children; and my much loved brother are waiting for me. I love - and I am loved.

I am happy.

The ground shook violently, suddenly and without warning. The research personnel dropped to their knees wherever they were, unable to remain upright - one or two, caught particularly off balance, measured their length on the floor. In the lab, glass shattered, the chemicals contained in the bottles mixing on the floor. Flame shot upwards, spreading rapidly as volatile fumes were ignited by the naked flame of a test burner. Kodar, a scientist from a colonised ocean planet where all the population lived on boats and whose sense of balance was therefore excellent, managed to reach a fire extinguisher, while his compatriot Veranen lunged towards the burner; swearing in his own language as the hot fuel tap scorched his fingers, he turned it off. The flames died as the ground steadied.

While the lab orderlies began to tidy things up, the scientists examined instruments, seeking information on the quake.

"I can make no sense of these readings, husband," T'Pring told Stonn. "Whatever it was, it was not a standard earthquake. It appears to be a completely unknown phenomenon."

Stonn thought for a moment. "We must report this to the Vulcan Science Academy; we may require further assistance."
